



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

### Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

### About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

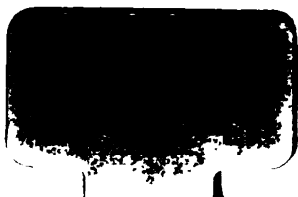




600011221D

28

345.











✓ 1.H. 1818.  
**THE IMPIOUS FEAST:**

**A POEM IN TEN BOOKS.**

**BY ROBERT LANDOR, M.A.**

**AUTHOR OF THE COUNT AREZZI, A TRAGEDY.**



**LONDON:**

**J. HATCHARD AND SON, 187, PICCADILLY.**

**MDCCCXXVIII.**

**345.**



**LONDON :**

**IBOTSON AND PALMER, PRINTERS, SAVOY STREET, STRAND.**

101

## P R E F A C E.

---

THE reader is not thus detained because I would hope, either to prevent criticism by a Preface, or to propitiate it. Such attempts rarely succeed, and never long. But some justification may appear necessary, both of the metre which I have chosen, and of the title—for reasons directly opposite—the first, because it is new—and the last because it is not new.

No other subject in the whole range of history, whether true or false, sacred or profane—seems more likely to captivate an ardent and ambitious imagination than Belshazzar's Feast—the magnificence of Babylon, the mysterious grandeur of its empire, the accomplishment of divine wrath, and above all, the sudden and terrific

nature of that catastrophe which has been recorded by Daniel. Truth can proceed no farther; and fiction has never yet advanced so far. But judgments better disciplined would be discouraged by those very qualities which most urgently recommend its adoption to sanguine or immature ones. Works of imagination, broadly founded upon the more conspicuous events recorded in history, are subject to many obvious disadvantages. If they closely correspond with the facts by which they have been suggested, they are little better than shadows moving as their more substantial causes move before them—than tales redoubled on a wearied audience—than echos less loud and less distinct in every repetition. No superiority of manner can compensate for that offence which the mind always feels whenever second impressions disturb and confuse the first.

If, on the contrary, they depart more widely and boldly from their originals, we are shocked by their violation of truth, by something more offensive than mere poetical improbability, by the undisguised outrage offered both to our memories and our understandings. Let me repeat that I here speak of subjects broadly founded on the more conspicuous events recorded in

history; not of those which, deriving their principal interest elsewhere—from imaginary creations, or obscure incidents—attach themselves to well-known truths. We have, at the present day, many splendid examples of this fertile and fortunate union between fiction and fact—in which we are compelled to admire the former for its grace, while we respect the latter for its integrity. The Greek poets generally looked to those heroic ages which left their imaginations sufficiently unrestricted. Virgil and Lucan among the Latin will best illustrate what I mean—they are examples of fiction supported by history, and of history corrupted by fiction. The Italian poets, and, with one exception, the greatest of our own, employed historical truth only when it was indistinct and mysterious in itself, or had been clouded by time and softened through distance. In all the greatest of his dramas, Shakspeare is hardly to be considered as such an exception—and we may fairly doubt whether those plays, which are essentially and immediately derived from English or Roman history, apply as strongly against my case as they, at first sight, appear to do. With nine readers out of ten, they do not *follow* but *precede*: they have gained the start, and told their tale first—like the ancient pedant in Katharine

and Petruccio, they establish themselves comfortably above, and then reprove their more honest but tardy competitor for his attempted intrusion.

But far more dangerous is any proposal to build upon the broad foundations of Sacred Scripture. Here our former alternative continues with greatly augmented embarrassment in the choice. If we scrupulously abstain from innovation, and reverentially refuse either to add or to diminish, we can only do that a second time which has been much better done already; we erect a similar building with worse materials; we discover much presumption and little skill. Supposing, however, that we boldly venture on novelty, and interweave our own imaginations with divine truth—divine truth fully and distinctly revealed—every judicious reader is disgusted by the mixture, and every pious one offended at the profanation. In the first case, there is sure to be a feeble copy of a well-known original—in the second, a palpable departure from reality, and an indecent disregard of holiness. Every one has knowledge enough to detect the fraud—to distinguish between such impure metal and the fine gold for which it has been substituted.

These observations apply principally to the historical parts of Sacred Scripture: but I may, perhaps, be permitted to add, what is indeed less immediately connected with my purpose, that they will extend much farther. Our great critic has attributed the almost universal poverty of sacred lyrical poetry by modern writers to the unapproachable majesty of its subject. He might have recollected that such reasoning, if it were just, would reach to all sacred compositions of this kind whatever; ancient as well as modern, the originals as well as the copies. Perhaps we may more easily account for the fact, as far as it is correct, by a recurrence to what I have already advanced. There is no good passion or affection incidental to human nature, in which religion may not have some share: it connects itself with the strongest as well as the more amiable—hope, fear, love, gratitude, sorrow, repentance: all our tenderer feelings as well as all our noblest aspirations are immediately concerned. Surely then religion is not only a subject for poetry—but it is poetry. Yet its simple holiness despises ornament, and eschews innovation. Every Christian has the sacred models always before him—he is familiar with the inspired melodies of holy writ—and by them he necessarily judges what

may be offered for the same purpose. A copy can have, at best, only the merit of a copy—while an attempt at novelty in matter, has the appearance of profanation—in manner, of levity. Rhyme itself seems to detract from its solemnity: and there is something incongruous in metre which, however beautiful, reminds us at once of other subjects. The hymns of *Paradise Lost* prove that devotion may be admirably harmonized in English poetry: and some by Bishop Heber, recently published, demonstrate how far genius and piety can conquer what is objectionable in rhyme.

This principle might, perhaps, be extended to other of the fine arts, were there leisure for its consideration; and explain why it is that painting derives fewer subjects from poetry than from prose; and rarely succeeds so well with those which have been largely and minutely described by either, however admirable they may be, as with scenes which are more obscure, or less elaborately detailed. From Homer, Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, Tasso, Shakspeare, Spencer, and Milton, there are few pictures of universal celebrity—because these poets have already perfected their own ideas; because their creations are so distinct, so forcible, and so well known, that the

sister art would offend if she presumed to alter, and give but inferior pleasure if she only attempted to imitate. If the pictures derived from them were exactly accordant with our own previous conception, they would appear little better than duplicates—if different, we should dislike their originality as affectation, or reject it as falsehood.

Belshazzar's Feast, or the Destruction of Babylon, however captivating to inexperience, is in itself—or rather by itself—a most hopeless undertaking; and therefore I do not undertake it. The catastrophe, if varied, could not be improved: no fresh impressions on the mind could equal those which have been produced by Sacred Scripture: and poetry never succeeds in retracing such perfect and vivid images as are imprinted there already. But, as we have seen above, historical truths, which are altogether unfit for the primary subjects of a poem, may be well calculated to support imaginary incidents, or incidents derived from sources less apparent. Should the scrupulous reader exclaim against any such intermixture, and insist upon more than a distinction—upon a separation—between truth and fancy, in all cases, and especially where the subject



is sacred—we shall very reverentially appreciate such remonstrances; but at the same time he must be reminded that his objection applies to the greatest works of human genius, to those mighty poets whom I have enumerated, and most expressly to *Paradise Lost*—*Paradise Regained*—and *Sampson Agonistes*. Milton has ventured much farther beyond the confines of sacred things than any other man—not excepting even Dante himself. Well may he exclaim——

“ Into the Heaven of Heavens I have presumed !”

Familiar as we are from childhood with his works, we hardly perceive how large a part of them is fictitious; we seldom consider that the whole structure of *Paradise Lost* rests upon six or seven verses in *Genesis*; and that the *Sacred Scriptures* elsewhere have supplied little more than texts on which he so gloriously expatiates. Nay, it may even be questioned whether we, at all times, sufficiently distinguish between the source and the stream: certainly many images which we consider as authentic are not in the Bible. But among the wonders which he has effected, one of the greatest is his inoffensive familiarity with sacred things.

For other poets it is enough if they can attach their own thoughts to revealed truth: they may connect but not confound: what is sacred they should leave, as such, not only unaltered but untouched. The privileges of fancy should have this limitation—she may imagine certain probable events as concurrent with those real ones which Scripture records; as happening at the same time; as implicated in their movements, and determined by their progress. They are reeds carried along a torrent on which they have no influence, and which would run just as fast whether they were there or not. They are branches which the tempest scatters, but of which it takes no cognizance. And yet it is to these, at last, that our attention will be principally directed—they are most within our reach—they constitute the novelty, and excite the interest.

Many more years have elapsed than I am willing to remember, since a subject something like my present one, was chosen by me at college. With presumption childish and extravagant, but innocent enough if it had manifested itself only in this manner, I seized upon the loftiest as the most desirable. The title was, *The Destruction of Babylon*, and the form, a sacred tragedy.

Nor did I sicken of a task to which I was so deplorably unequal, till its completion. By that time I had discovered how much labour was thrown away, and how much more profitably my diligence might have been occupied. Unlike my present poem, that drama was broadly founded upon the fifth chapter of Daniel. Characters and incidents which are now the principal ones, were altogether secondary. It was afterwards cast aside, with many other abortive projects of the same nature, which I had at last learnt to value as they deserved, and which were soon forgotten among more important pursuits.

With greater leisure I have since expanded and remodelled my old design—have changed the dramatic into a narrative form—and have attempted to remove those objections which were before so fatal, by separating the fictitious parts from the true. Whatever power may be exercised upon the feelings, is now purely domestic. The incidents are such as we may suppose to have occurred during the three last days of Babylon—for my story includes no more. A distinguished contemporary has chosen, if not the same subject, a subject with nearly the same title, during that long interval of

which I have spoken. There would have appeared nothing surprising if twenty minds, instead of two, had been made captive by a catastrophe so tremendous. Mr. Milman, with his usual good judgment, has contrived to deduce the interest of his drama from a private and an imaginary source. There will, I believe, be found but one point of resemblance between his plan and mine; nor is this solitary coincidence of much importance. It was suggested to both by the same page in Ancient History; and will be discovered in my fourth book. On his action it operates durably and essentially—on mine, casually and only for a moment. With this exception, it is hardly possible that any two works founded on a subject apparently the same, should be more dissimilar. My seventh book also contains some few lines which may remind the reader, not less to my disadvantage, of Sardanapalus. In both instances, these passages were written and read long before the publications appeared which they, so far, resemble—in both instances, they might have been removed or disguised, with very little inconvenience, if I had condescended. Had my original plan of a drama been retained in its primitive condition, some coincidences would have, indeed, appeared much too suspicious either

for innocence or hardihood. As it is, I would rather, of the two, be thought a borrower from authors so affluent, than hazard an imputation far more disgraceful.

It remains that I should say something in apology of the metre. Narrative poetry of a graver kind has so generally been written either in what is called the heroic couplet, the stanza of Spenser, the eight syllable line, or blank verse—that no other choice seems to remain. The heroic couplet, however beautiful in shorter compositions, is now generally exploded as too monotonous for more extensive ones. The stanza of Spenser is best adapted to romance, love, adventure, chivalry—or, at least, has been so long retained by them in their service, that, beside its other objections, this one—where the poem is quite of another character—seems enough. Of the same kind, but much more obvious and forcible, is that to eight syllable lines, whether in couplets or stanzas. We are thus reduced to blank verse.

I wish that I knew how to speak of it honestly and yet without offence. The two greatest of all poets have adopted and perfected it. Miserably as its character

has been depraved since, there can be no doubt but that it is alone suited to dramatic poetry. Milton has also proved its excellence in narrative—an excellence which, even if it were attainable, would be undesirable for any other purpose than such poems as his. The involved, the elaborate and learned construction of his sentences, has often been imitated, but always ineffectually. That majesty which is so becoming, because so natural in him, appears absurd when assumed by others. They pant and sweat half smothered under the burden of a garment which he wears easily as his ordinary clothing, notwithstanding its magnificence. Not only the language of *Paradise Lost*, but the metre, originated spontaneously from a mind so wonderful; and may be traced in all his other works, whether verse or prose.

“ He fed on thoughts that voluntary moved  
Harmonious numbers.”

And was visited by a muse who inspired

“ Easy his unpremeditated verse.”

It is, I believe, scarcely possible, in a poem founded on sacred scripture, at all times to avoid the appearance of imitation. The same great storehouse of holy images

and Asiatic phraseology is open to both—scriptural language must frequently be employed, and in proportion as it is appropriate, will it suggest a resemblance. We should not, however, presume to quote his example as an authority for what we ourselves may do. To say that Milton ever either stole or borrowed were false: the sovereign poet took openly what he pleased—from his contemporaries, as their tribute; and from the ancients, as his inheritance. For my own part, I have always walked the most easily, as well as the most safely, when alone.

Narrative blank verse, when unsupported by such awful stateliness as is becoming only in him, incurs the danger of pompous and plethoric monotony, on the one hand—or of feeble, disjointed, prosaic inefficiency, on the other. Nay, even that which has been much more successfully employed in moral and descriptive poetry, is seldom simple as well as strong. I shall not be supposed to depreciate genius so exalted as the genius of Young, Thomson, or Akenside, when I acknowledge how much less pleasing to me is their metre than their descriptions—how impatient I have sometimes become under that suffocating snow-shower of great soft words which, while

they obscure the objects described, have no other apparent purpose but to fill up crevices in the metre. This grandiloquous phraseology, swelling into sentences of the same tone, has descended, as a common inheritance, among their posterity. There are not many readers, perhaps, who dare to acknowledge that they have ever felt satiated by the Seasons; but surely there never yet was one reader who ended the *Castle of Indolence* without regret, or could rest till he had ended it.

With so many great authorities before him, not only the ordinary lover of poetry, but the critic himself, hesitates to acknowledge that blank verse has lost much of its charm. Two living poets, whose genius has the same salutary influence on our literature, that their characters have upon our morals, do every thing possible for its revival. They demonstrate its capabilities, and using it as the eloquent medium of Christian Philosophy and Christian Heroism, assert its claims to our regard by descriptions the most powerful, and meditations the most profound. But we may doubt whether either the *Excursion* or *Don Roderick* is indebted for its high estimation by all competent and unprejudiced readers, so much, to the versification, as to many other less disputable excellences.



At all events, whatever may have been the success of others in this most difficult metre, I soon became dissatisfied with my own. The possibility of extracting much which is desirable both from rhyme and blank verse—of preserving their better qualities, and refusing those that are incompatible or otherwise objectionable—remains perhaps to be ascertained at some future time. In hands more skilful than mine, it is, I am persuaded, by no means impracticable. This attempt will at least serve to exemplify what I mean. The principal recommendation of blank verse is its variety. Lines may be extended into sentences—or as Milton expresses himself, the sense may be “variously drawn out from one verse into another,” with almost as many variations of sound as in prose itself. Much of this excellence is not inconsistent with rhymes when judiciously interspersed at proper distances: and that rhymes in a language like ours, if unnecessary, are graceful and useful—to sustain metre loose by itself, to distinguish more broadly between verse and prose, and to satisfy ears which miss them when wanting and expect them through habit, seems generally allowed. But this recurrence of similar sounds at suitable intervals, should vary according to the subject. It may be occasionally so close and so frequent as to resemble a stanza; or it may be rendered so lax as to

have all the freedom of blank verse. Every line is of the same length, and should have a corresponding one either nearer or more remote. The greatest difficulty is thus to vary and adapt, to tighten or loosen the chain of harmony; still preserving a general accordance, and rendering the transition easy as well as inoffensive. Rhymes may occur as often as the repetition continues to be agreeable; but they become useless, and indeed are no longer rhymes when their corresponding sounds are lost in an interval too far protracted.

Several short lyrical poems have been written with metre thus far resembling mine, that their final words rhyme irregularly, and appear to fall by accident, though in their proper places. Such is Lord Byron's Ode to Venice. But I am not aware that any attempt at variety in different parts of the same poem, has been made—by suiting them to the passages described—collecting or dispersing them at pleasure—employing a more formal structure, almost the stanza or couplet, where it is expedient—united with such freedom of inflection and cadence as we expect no where else excepting in blank verse. Two or three specimens of a lyrical kind are given in the Chaldæan Hymns.

Their composition is on principles extremely dissimilar to the narrative part, where I have often attempted not only simplicity but austerity, rejecting all superfluous ornament in language, metre, imagery, or illustration.

But even if thus much should be accomplished in the versification at the expense of congruity—if the transitions should be so abrupt as to mark their change before it is complete, and the different passages should not only vary among themselves, but disagree—my labour has been thrown away. Let the reader, however, remember that such metre was not preferred because it is abstractedly the best—but the best for my purpose, the best in my power, the best which I could produce.

The alteration of my plan in one respect is almost certain to please those who care little about its other changes. I had extracted from ancient and modern authorities whatever particulars related to the history of Babylon; had expanded quotations into notes, and notes into dissertations—on its wars, customs, arts, morals, policy, philosophy, religion, and origin—the wonders of its architecture, the fertility of its climate,

the extent and duration of its empire. From all this, they are entirely unencumbered: they will find not one word of prose beyond the Preface.

Of its history I need only observe that erroneous distinctions seem to have been made between the Chaldean and the Assyrian kingdoms. During many generations, they were two unequal branches of the same empire. Babylon, if founded first, did not arrive at its supremacy till after the extinction of Nineveh. In all ages an especial gratification was manifested by Asiatic conquerors in creating and destroying. The more habitable parts of that mighty continent have been almost covered by cities built and ruined in succession. Every victorious sovereign wasted the capitals of his predecessors that he might erect new ones to his own glory with their materials, and people them with their inhabitants. In the time of Nebuchadnezzar, the elder sister gained, or regained, an ascendancy; and after having utterly destroyed her rival and relative, established a new dynasty, transferring riches, sovereignty, people, every thing, to Babylon. This ambition to be considered as the founder of a city or empire, occasions much confusion. Nimrod, Belus, Semiramis, and Nebu-

chadnezzar were all called founders. There is much reason to suppose that the two first names belonged to the same individual: besides a general renovation, many works of almost incredible magnificence are attributed to the two last.

Poetry has no room here in which to amplify and exaggerate. Walls of solid masonry sixty miles in extent, more than a hundred yards high, and thirty broad, with towers and gates proportionable to them—Palaces each occupying as much ground as a respectable metropolitan city elsewhere—Gardens with hills and valleys supported by arches in the air—a Bridge of surpassing magnitude above the Euphrates, and a passage under it—are some only among the better authenticated wonders of history. But when we read of a Tower far higher than the highest Alps—or of an artificial Lake one hundred and sixty miles in circumference—the Muse, who hates arithmetic, and never uses other than round numbers—has little chance. Her wisest plan is to decline a race against the extravagances of graver fiction, and to start only within the confines of possibility.

Cyrus, prophetically named long before in sacred

scripture, continued to besiege Babylon without having produced the slightest impression on her strength, when that period was arrived which God's wisdom had appointed for her destruction and for the deliverance of his captive people. The book of Daniel describes an idolatrous festival, but informs us only in continuation, that Belshazzar was slain and his kingdom conquered on the same night. Profane history adds to these facts the means by which they were accomplished. The waters of the Euphrates were turned into a new channel, and the city was surprised through that from which they had been diverted. Nitocris, the mother of Belshazzar, and celebrated for her wisdom, is supposed by some writers to have been that queen who entered his banqueting-hall, and named Daniel as a prophet of "an excellent Spirit." Her reign appears to have been conjointly with her son after his arrival at manhood, and for some years in unrestricted supremacy before. She is sometimes confounded with Semiramis, the same mighty works being ascribed to both. A story about her tomb above one of the city gates is however quite irreconcilable with our supposition. She who entered the banqueting-hall could have had little subsequent leisure for such contrivances and inscriptions.

Warburton supposes that the Chaldæan hymns were mere depositories of popular fables, and that the divine unity was taught to the initiated. It is much more certain that every part of their religion which could be understood by the people was licentious in the extreme. Some opinions of a more refined nature were, no doubt, common both to the Chaldæan and the Persian sages. Fire, and the sun as its source or centre, was the chief visible object of adoration to both. The heavenly bodies were intelligent beings, or the habitations of intelligent beings. Every star had some connexion with humanity propitious or malignant, and shining with clearer and larger radiance through the serenity of their beautiful skies, was supposed by those who studied, and perhaps by those who did not study its changes, to be watchful for their safety, or envious of their happiness. The elements were all deified, or at least were under the separate government of their appropriate deities. As such superstitions descended to the vulgar they became proportionably gross. There is as much confusion and uncertainty about the Chaldæan idols as those of Egypt or India. Much might be advanced on the supposition that both of these nations, and consequently all other nations whatever, borrowed

their idolatries from Mesopotamia, as their common centre and original cradle. A resemblance so remarkable between the Chaldæan Gods, and those of Greece, could not have been accidental. The Persians must have tolerated, at least, that grosser idolatry among their confederates—and the armies of Cyrus comprehended many nations.

Besides those Deities of higher and more extensive dominion, there were innumerable local ones—guardian Gods of kingdoms, provinces, or cities—beyond which they had no authority till carried away captive, when they transferred their affections to their conquerors. The Greeks and Romans were only imitators in this sort of sacrilegious rape. In another particular also they copied the Asiatics—they deified their more heroic sovereigns after death—and sometimes, if this honour appeared to the powerful candidate either as too tardy or too doubtful, before. Such, perhaps, was the origin of those Chaldæan Gods who afterwards became most eminent, Bel, Nebo, Benoth, and several others. No just objection to this probability arises from their astronomical character. Even as late as Julius Cæsar a star was found to assist at the apotheosis of a hero.



But amidst all this extravagance of superstition which so thickly peopled the universe with subjects for adoration; and not content with such airy deities as filled their groves, frequented their fountains, and presided at their festivals—placed altars and images in every house: there was undoubtedly a deep and general belief that some far more holy and powerful nature claimed their service, abhorred their pollutions, and threatened their apostacy. Every nation had its “unknown God”—and we read that in the highest story of their temple the Babylonians placed a table or altar where there was neither priest nor image. It was not possible that the terrors of Jehovah should have been either forgotten, or carelessly remembered, by those nations which had so frequently suffered from them. This hardness of heart, this obduracy in rebellion, this addiction to obscene rites and licentious sacrifices rather than to a pure but awful service, constituted their guilt.

There is much reason to suppose that image worship, and worship of the celestial luminaries, originated in the same way. Human weakness needed some mediation between its own impurities and that holy Creator—some less terrible protectors to propitiate and intercede.

Nations, cities, families, and individuals, placed themselves under the friendly guardianship—each of its own appropriate intercessor, whose honour was engaged in their protection. The nobler patrons obtained many clients: and other advocates who had less employment might be supposed to exercise greater zeal and diligence where they were trusted.

All history has agreed in attributing to Chaldæa the earliest inventions in astronomy and her spurious sister astrology. Much might be adduced to demonstrate that in those arts and sciences of which Egypt is so generally considered as the parent, Chaldæa was at least equally early. With the vanities of necromancy, witchcraft, augury, and such like—they must have united far more substantial knowledge. They excelled in casting metals; they understood something of statuary and even of painting; they were skilled in “all kinds of music;” we read much of their embroidered garments and sumptuous tapestry—and surpassing every other people in architecture and astronomy, they must unquestionably have had some knowledge of mathematics.

That almost universal distaste to poetry—at least to

poetry unrecommended by much previous success—which distinguishes us at present, might discourage an author far more sanguine than myself from publication. But he who hopes little will suffer little through disappointment—and I can hardly yet believe that an art is finally and irretrievably perishing, which during three thousand years, has been considered in every civilized country, as the highest and the wisest.

**THE IMPIOUS FEAST.**

**BOOK I.**



# THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

## BOOK I.

---

THE Eastern Shepherds mixed their tales with truth,  
And wisdom breathed the melodies of song :  
“ Hear us,” they cried, “ ye happy !—let the strong  
“ Distrust their might, their boastfulness the proud—  
“ Power leads its captives midst the tears of ruth,  
“ And glory’s halo circles but a cloud ;  
“ Grief tracks the feet of love, and death stands near to  
youth !”

Who drinks in faith with us shall never thirst !—  
From wells less pure and more remote, they drew :

And yet alike those living streams at first  
Rose on the hill where heaven's perennial dew  
Descended holiest—but the devious flood  
Came down polluted, and its course went forth  
Abundant, though defiled. Their thoughts were good ;  
And still from Him the moral of the tale  
In whom good ends, begins, and has its worth—  
Who showered the pleasant soil, and blessed the air  
With health and fruitfulness: or while the gale  
Breathed o'er their twilight fields, reclining there  
By old Euphrates, on his farthest side,  
In that Chaldæan plain where Babel stood ;  
They told her impious strength, and blasted pride,  
And why those towers were desolate.

For me

A harder task—to join with holier names  
More doubtful fables: but the spirit is free  
Which neither asks nor dreads men's thanks nor blames,  
And means no wrong—spreading its venturous wings  
—Irresolute, indeed, yet not afraid,

And joyful in its own just liberty—  
Above the level of recorded things,  
Though few shall mark its flight, and most of those  
upbraid.

To you the mournful tale—for ye are blest—  
Whose hearts are prone to pity! Feigned or true,  
It speaks the terrors of presumptuous power;  
How soon the strong may stoop, how frail the best;  
Apostate innocence, with late remorse  
Hopeless and unassuaged; afflictions new,  
And all the thunders of that impious hour,  
While tears repentant fell to quench the curse—  
Such tears will not be lost, ye merciful, with you!

Still in her native glory, unsubdued,  
And indestructible by force or time,  
That first of mightiest cities, mistress, queen,  
Even as of old, earth's boast and marvel stood;  
Imperious, inaccessible, sublime:  
If changed, she might be all that she had been;  
No conscious doubts abased her regal eye,



Rest had not made it weak but more serene—  
Those who repell'd her power, revered her majesty.  
Full, at her feet, wealth's largest fountain streamed,  
Dominion crowned her head ; on either side  
Were sceptre'd terror and armed strength—she seemed  
Above mischance imperishably high :  
Though half the nations of mankind defied,  
They raged but could not harm her—fierce disdain  
Beheld the rebel kingdoms storm in vain—  
What were their threats to her, Bel's daughter and his  
pride !

Once more, and high as ever, her triumphs swell !  
The tumult rises in her streets—a cry  
Of rash and dissolute multitudes—their sound  
O'errules the trumpet, and the maddening shell  
Seems hoarse midst those shrill blasts of victory :  
The encumbered chariots groan, the war-steeds bound  
Unheard by those who guide them—" Bel ! great Bel !  
" Descends to bruise the kings that hate his reign—  
" O'er Media's shame lift we his ensigns high !

“ Belshazzar rides a conqueror from the plain—  
“ He shall subdue the earth, and Bel possess the sky !”  
While such their song, as chorus to the strain  
Ambiguous truth, though ill-distinguished there,  
Renews untired the two-faced prophecy,  
—“ Chaldæa ends the last of all her wars.”  
From lip to lip it floats upon the air,  
But not one heart interprets or discerns.  
Night gems the glowing infinite with stars,  
And westward, where they tend, the moon returns  
With slenderest horns first visible yet clear :  
The purple firmament around her burns,  
While all its worshipped hosts like gods appear,  
Not dimly, as to us in this chill clime,  
But brighter orb'd, unsullied, large, and near :  
Even from the fount of light their radiant urns  
Are filled, and less, but quenchless lustre given,  
Which still they carry through the abyss of time,  
Each scarce a spark to all, yet all at large in Heaven.  
No leisure now for wisdom—he who tried

—Whether his arts were turned toward good or ill—  
To learn, that he might serve, or thwart their will,  
And from some lonely pinnacle espied  
Their nightly wanderings o'er his head, descends,  
Leaving his task imperfect. From the roof  
Too high, and jutting cupola obscure,  
While by her lamp the diligent matron bends,  
Shadowing Chaldaean flowers o'er Sidon's woof—  
From Astoreth's latticed balconies impure,  
Whose lust has altars—from the domes of pride,  
The hall and chamber, old and young come down.  
Now questions lost ere answered, haste, surprise,  
Ignorant belief, much told and little known ;  
The sounding streets are full, though fair and wide  
They bear aloft their structures to the skies,  
Interminable, numberless, direct ;  
Built as by mightier hands than those of man  
They seem, by more than human architect,  
For giant habitants designed—the plan  
Of one who mocks decay and never dies.

Yet is the porch filled full, the broad-paved way  
Thronged and oppressed throughout: processions roar,  
Struggling from god to god. In long array  
Priests robed, or virgin choirs, with lamps before  
And sacred fires, go forth. Their bright heads wear  
The wreaths of triumph: in their hands they bear  
Gifts meet for victory.—“ Almighty king!”  
They cry, “ immutable in love, in wrath  
“ Implacable, now manifest in both,  
“ Receive the gifts thy thankful children bring,  
“ Almighty Bel!”—From Bel begins the strain,  
Their first and holiest; Nebo follows next;  
And then Adrammalech, and Sheshach old,  
With captive Rimmon here adored again;  
And Benoth, mother of the gods—perplexed  
The fable which her dreaming priests uphold,  
Yet still believed, where nothing seems impure;  
And nothing false but innocence and truth:  
Worshipped as Bel’s great parent and his queen  
With jarring attributes and rites obscure,

In spring begins her renovated youth,  
Which fades ere ends the year—unchaste, obscene,  
Of twofold sex and double nature she.—  
These were Chaldæa's boast, to such as these  
The Babylonian virgins bowed their knee—  
Long-served or late-adopted deities !  
Egypt had taught her faith, and lent her worms—  
Nile's snake was sculptured with its brazen coils,  
And Tyre's scaled serpent : Asmadai upreared  
His star-topped sceptre : every kingdom's spoils  
Furnished an idol whom the conqueror feared.

And some had human, some had bestial forms,  
Fowl, fish, or reptile—all had worshippers !  
In crimson ephod rich with pearls and gold,  
And blazing midst the light of sacrifice,  
The priest, profuse of incense, leads their prayers.  
Diviners, dreamers, prophets, false yet bold,  
Watching escapes from fraud ; astrologers  
—Themselves perplexed by their own subtilties—  
Ascribing skill to chance ; soothsayers that tell

What demons teach them, lend their lips to lies,  
Yet feared as true—Chaldæa learns too well  
Such dubious wisdom by worse means; and here  
Mingling their claims with hers—as for their sake,  
And through their arts, her triumph—they partake  
Of glory with the idols. Such appear  
The fanes of sleepless Babylon—without,  
Even worse and wilder still ! Belshazzar ! Bel !  
Each has his priests and praises ; but their strain  
Toils to exalt its equal gods in vain—  
Nor marked, nor heard above the enduring shout  
Of infinite tongues agreed alone to tell  
What none regards. Shame tarries there no more ;  
Awe, scared, flies fast away ; irreverend sport  
Turns straight to malice ; what was mirth before,  
Unbridled, now seems violence ; reproof, retort,  
Burn on contentious spirits like sparks ; the jest  
Is echoed back by louder scorn again :—  
Mixed with the frolic laugh that stuns their feast,  
Shouts of fierce strife arise, defiance, pain,  
And outrage done or suffered.

One indeed,  
Of holier aspect, more sedate, appeared  
Unsocial midst the crowd, and bent on speed  
So to escape it: but his gait was weak,  
Threading those dangerous labyrinths alone;  
Age had made white like wool the abundant beard  
That spread between his girdle and his cheek—  
And grief, which takes time's form, yet ever keeps its own;  
Both left their tokens marked upon his head.  
Alien he seemed, like Israel in the street  
Of envious Egypt, when his house came down  
—Where famiæ first had sent his sons for bread—  
From Canaan and its fruitless fields, to meet  
The lost, the long-deplored, and most beloved.  
Like him, and of his seed, the Elder moved  
With angry haste in spiritual bitterness;  
As if pollution reached from what he saw,  
Poisoning both eyes and heart, though disapproved.  
His soul abhorred, lax wisdom's feigned distress  
Worn down to ill conformity—the thaw  
Of zeal once fixed—tired honour's last excuse

While righteous scorn dissolves from less to less,  
Through custom's might or nature's feebleness—  
Fixed in the observant love of that dread law  
Which spake so loud from Sinai, daily use  
A daily goad applied, and forced to draw  
Fresh hate of sins so foul from their excess.

He could remember Salem ere she fell ;  
His feet in childhood o'er her pavement strayed—  
Sorrow and time will ever paint too well  
The lost when hopeless, all things loved in vain :  
Fair as she was indeed, by these portray'd  
More fair appeared her image !—She would reign  
Beyond the reach of enmity and Bel—  
Her children seek her, laden with the spoil,  
And holier courts a purer offering see—  
Here in the high place of pride, lust's citadel,  
Where round his wrists had burnt the accursed chain,  
And coward threats pursued him to his toil,  
His home still is, his sepulchre must be !

Thus midst a faithless world to grieve and gaze



Walked Noah ere it perished. Askance he viewed  
Their gaudy idols borne—plebeian gods  
Of wondrous forms and attributes, pursued  
With vulgar welcome through the clamorous ways.  
Each had his emblems—fishes, doves, or rods—  
Unhoused and vagrant deities at most :  
Phoenician Derce, Adad, Nergal, Rach  
And Merodach, the brutal Suburbs praise :  
Both these, and more, whose names themselves are lost,  
Pass on with bellowing thousands at their back ;  
Familiar deities, oft the undreaded joke  
Of their own ministers, now a popular show,  
Marks set for wantonness—their fame is heard,  
Their altars crowd the streets, their priests provoke  
Lascivious worship in the frantic herd,  
Blaspheming and adoring as they go.

The offended Elder casts his eyes below,  
And feels the abomination, nor abstains  
From wishes muttered through his teeth hard closed,  
Some instant curse, or old prophetic woe—

“ Would Ekron’s boils were here, with Egypt’s blains !”

It seems uncleanness to be near their lusts,

Foul sin, to have seen such sins, and not opposed.

Old, and in peril both, amidst the gusts

Of wrath or sport unheeded, he went by ;

If any saw, they harmed him not—even there

Awful he passed in age and sanctity :

And thence to safer darkness, from the glare

Of fires and torches, toward his home he turns ;

But first looks back, as one constrained to fly

By those he deeply hates, and fain would dare ;

Reluctant shame with fiercer anguish burns ;

Pride waxes prouder in its misery.

Wisdom with better thoughts prevailed ; aloof

From streets where madness walked ’twixt mirth and

dread,

Though but a little space, his dwelling stood,

Lonely, obscure, and silent. O’er its roof,

And round its walls, the giant cedar spread,

Ilex and cypress mixed with palms—a wood

Of myrtle undergrowth: for shadowy grove,  
Cool glade, and thicket wild had room enough,  
With many a sylvan maze, and verdant solitude,  
Enclosed within that mighty city's bound;  
Where undisturbed the consecrated dove  
Labours his hoarse endearments all day long.  
And all the night yet louder strains resound—  
More sweetly thrills the hereditary wrong:  
That lonely bird, whose notes are grief and love,  
With iterated plaints deplores her young,  
Listening the cadence as it died around,  
Strives to surpass herself, and still resumes the song.

Time seemed himself a willing captive there;  
The many-figured zone which girt him round  
Was marked with suns and stars for weeks and hours;  
A host of gods deformed his calendar:  
All nature claimed a place, and welcome found—  
All climes paid tribute of their best—with flowers  
The garden bloomed, the vineyard and the mead  
Were thickly strewn midst palaces and towers:

In groves the gods were worshipped, in the shade  
Of ancient trees their bellowing victims bled,  
And such they sanctified: but oft beneath  
Those gloomy boughs, was wrought some work of dread,  
Or omen feigned by fraud upon its knees,  
Which made them cursed and impious—violent death,  
Of what before was hallowed, strife, a sound  
From unknown oracles, the lightning's scath,  
Self-slaughter, incest,—these, and such as these  
Untrodden left the desecrated ground:  
The wisest passed it with suspended breath,  
Marked by malignant gods, a place ordained for wrath.

So where this old man dwelt the loftiest trees  
Had once been scorched from Heaven, and all who feared  
Adrammalech or Bel fled thence: but he  
Loved most what most they hated. Enough for him  
That in those shades no idol face appeared,  
No altar's smoke, no suppliant's gift could be—  
Amidst its tufted shrubs and pathways dim,  
From branch to branch no fluttering garlands hung,

Nor ever had the cymbal's sound been heard  
With dance or hymn, while laughing voices sung  
Lascivious praise to some foul deity.

Old as its palms, yet scarcely half so high,  
The abode was like the site, obscure and grave :  
One narrow entrance pierced the outward wall,  
Whose granite shafts and ponderous architrave  
Were all its ornaments. The court within  
Sufficed for light and air, though dim and small ;  
A mossy cistern crowned above the brim  
With large leaved water-blossoms, and a well  
Circled by seats of stone. At morn the din  
From bees and early birds uprose, the smell  
Of flowers and spice shrubs filled the dewy air—  
Sacred he thought the place ; it was to him  
A shelter safe from pride, a temple pure from sin.

Whatever in this world seemed holiest, all  
He honour'd as most just, most wise, most rare,  
The princes of his tribe, the approved of God,  
Priests, Nobles, Elders, Chiefs, assembled there.

Two Prophets blessed the solitary hall,  
An aged and contrite king its threshold trode;  
Love turned the easy gate to need and care,  
And mercy made its court her chief abode.

Ill feet kept wide—thus superstition reigned  
And did through fear the offices of love,  
Sheltering its enemies. That blasted grove  
Had such a light to cheer its shades, as feigned  
Of gems in caverns, where the sorcerer needs  
Nor lamp nor fire, but walks his confines drear,  
Perfects strange works, and mystic wisdom reads,  
Lit by no ray beside. From envious eyes,  
Like meaner wealth kept secretly, was here  
—Of Earth, indeed, yet spotless, if below  
Were any pure—and human by the tear  
That proves us holy in our sympathies—  
With meek endurance marked upon her brow,  
Of all his race the last—his brother's child—  
One out of many left to help him now;  
In this unsocial world an orphan guest,

From death to life an offering undefiled ;  
Escaped the pitiless hour which ends in rest,—  
The boughs are torn but this fair blossom thrives ;  
A single lamb is rescued from the wild,  
His present hope, his solace, pride, and trust :  
It is for her he cares, through her he lives,  
—Still cherished as the last and loved the best—  
By whose young mirth the impatient heart beguiled  
Endures its tedious absence from the dust :  
Captivity grew easier when she smiled,  
Whate'er she did seemed good, where'er she dwelt was  
blest.

The palm-branch murmurs overhead, the gale  
Flutters a moment as it passes by  
Midst leaves more fragrant bathed in dew ; while pale  
With panting heart, and large dilated eye,  
Breathless, half-raised, she deems his footsteps near—  
Then lapsing on the languid couch again,  
Resolves to grieve no longer, with a sigh ;  
And feels, through lonely thoughts repelled in vain,

That hope will sometimes sicken into pain,  
And men may listen till they dread to hear.

At last it is his voice, the incredulous ear  
So oft deceived scarce trusts it—yet her grasp  
Rests trembling on the bolt undrawn. Again,  
In louder tones he calls her—from the door  
With rattling links on earth devolves the chain,  
The oaken bar is lifted from its hasp;  
His steps are guided o'er the unequal sill:—  
Both safe within, the thankful Elder says—  
“ Distrust like this is wisdom in the poor;  
“ Such wariness shall thrive—the perilous ways  
“ Are filled with idols; Bel's intemperate crowd  
“ Go forth to violent deeds.” The virgin still  
Surveyed the brightness of those glorious skies  
Whose soft breeze languished round her glossy hair  
And idly toiled to lift it from her eyes—  
Beneath the else stainless azure, one small cloud  
Lay lightly floating through the midnight air,  
A sail becalmed between that world and this:



“ Night hears them not ”—she said—“ they reach not  
there !

“ They cannot vex her silence with their cries :

“ Regardless nature slumbers still in bliss—

• “ Those stars shine clear despite their blasphemies .

“ Like isles they seem, indeed, as some believe,

“ Where happier kinds, in everlasting rest

“ Observe their sabbaths undisturbed, and live

“ With God, remote from sin : these sure are blest !

“ All things appear in peace but where man is.

“ I trespass now, yet Sabra do the wise,

“ Alone, at such an hour, look out for injuries ?”

She ended here, the gracious Elder smiled,  
Replaced both bar and chain, then following went  
Within, sat down, and spake—“ Alas ! my child,  
“ We need not wander far to find offence :  
“ Such household thrift, as if the oil were spent  
“ In useless vigils while I tarried hence,  
“ With gentle rule, becomes the housewife mild.  
“ I would approach thee now, and strive to tell

“ How sights of slaughter kept me where I strayed—  
“ How triumphs the oppressor yet, and hell  
“ Prevails for Babylon !” The wondering maid  
Looked as prepared to speak, but ere desire  
Found words, or thought could frame its questions well,  
Like one that prays in grief, the Elder said—  
“ Spare us, Lord God !—forsake us not ! Our cry  
“ Is here, as in the wilderness, unjust—  
“ Abstain as thou didst then ! To thee so high,  
“ Lord ! what is man ?—the hills appear as dust—  
“ The everlasting stars are sparks of fire  
“ Which thou canst quench, who kindled : near thee  
stand  
“ Spirits whose glory it is to worship there,  
“ And bliss to do thy will—his thoughts are lust,  
“ His flesh corruption kneaded from the mire ;  
“ His life itself but breath—and breath but air—  
“ Air soon dispersed ; his presence on the land  
“ An unimpressive shade of grief and care  
“ Which leaves no track ! O child, let us confess

“ Thus far—be this our scant ascription still !—

“ Gladly rememb’ring what we are, and what

“ Unasked he grants though recompensed with ill,

“ Nor tires in doing good. He hath inclined

“ Some who despised us once to help and bless,

“ And tongues which did blaspheme, at length do not :

“ This too is much—we wander where we will,

“ Unharm’d since night I passed the mad and blind.”

“ Thou spakest of slaughter, Sabra—and the sight

“ Of triumph to the oppressor,” thus replied,

When space was given, the maid : “ by fears beguiled

“ Our thoughts aim wrong, and here was none to guide :

“ Bel’s feast begins to-morrow with the light ;

“ In chase of shades my erring doubts ran wild.

“ Methought the days were changed, if counted right,

“ And that the first was come.”—“ A dream—a lie

“ They serve,” he says : “ to sinfulness and pride

“ They make continual sacrifices, child !—

“ Nor ever ends the feast of vanity.

“ Some special triumph now their hearts contrive,

“ And how to mingle glory with delight :  
“ But mark thou what I saw since eve, then strive  
“ To keep back doubts. Our Elders have a place,  
“ —Since daily custom now hath made it ours,  
“ And he, whose charge it is, God’s proselyte  
“ In this, and all things, gracious toward our race—  
“ For cooler breathing when the sultry hours  
“ Oppress, ’twixt noon and eve : perchance as high  
“ Above the city walls its dizzy height,  
“ As they above the earth. Hard toil to climb,  
“ But well repaid ! the unobstructed sight  
“ Extends its vision from that post sublime  
“ O’er all this world’s delight and potency—  
“ From tower to tower as large, and gate to gate,  
“ Each like a city, such as happier days  
“ Admiring saw in Israel, and misdeemed  
“ Till lost, impregnable. ’Twas thus we sat  
“ While the sun tarried with its level rays  
“ Dazzling the dewy pastures. All things seemed  
“ Coloured with ruddier beauty in the glow

“ O’er all suffused, and in that crimson haze  
“ Which smoked as incense toward the temperate eve  
“ From off the earth’s green altar. Thick below  
“ The strength and pride of many nations trode—  
“ Where Median tents lay scattered infinite,  
“ Like flocks new washed for shearing, when they leave  
“ Vales less secure to congregate at night—  
“ Or sheaves in harvest o’er the autumnal fields:  
“ Ensigns emblazoned as the stars of God,  
“ Robes stiff with woven gold, resplendent shields,  
“ Pavilions, steeds—the turbulent stir and heat  
“ Of armies disarrayed, with all the cries  
“ Of all those restless multitudes—behind,  
“ Where swarmed the city’s millions at our feet,  
“ On crowded roofs, and gilded balconies,  
“ Along the walls and gates—from every street,  
“ Or court or grove—we heard the tumult rise,  
“ And seemed to count the remnant of mankind—  
“ A part more numerous than the whole combined  
“ To raise Bel’s tower accursed above the skies,

“ So soon confounded—and the tongues they spoke

“ Were scarce less loud or dissonant.

“ The wind

“ Pressed on Euphrates lightly, and awoke

“ With strength to bend the sacrificial steam

“ From verdant altars built along his side ;

“ To struggle faintly round the fluttering tent

“ Beyond unfixed—or swell above the stream

“ Sails ill-sustained and feebly amplified.

“ War forced to rest, seems willing to relent—

“ The populace keep their leisure as a feast,

“ And every pause affords its holiday :

“ We saw the sacrifice, the loose-robed priest,

“ The dance impure, the games of venturous youth,

“ —Armed as they were in many-tinctured mail—

“ And ill-restrained contention. Swerved away

“ From God—through ignorance alien to his truth—

“ All nature's mysteries furnish but a tale

“ Obscure, and loosely credited at most.

“ Not idol shapes alone they serve—the gale

“ Which cools—the fire which warms—Love—Hate—  
Life—Death—

“ Things seen, unseen, imagined, are their boast :

“ Even unsubstantial ill, as what they fear,

“ And casual good their benefactor—here

“ Are worshipped gods !

“ Along the river’s bank

“ High midst its osiers climbed they—and beneath

“ Their naked sports were dangerous in its reeds :

“ Part swam from shore to shore—with resolute breath

“ To sound its depth, the headlong diver sank :

“ Others far off in studious ease reclined

“ —These chiefly seemed the old—on grassy meads

“ Where grew the herbage thickest : peaceful they

“ And more retired, their mighty schemes designed

“ Of laws and empires. From the palm-trees shade,

“ To rouse their lazy votaries whence they lay,

“ Loud sackbuts piped, or noisier timbrels brayed,

“ Provoking merriment. Let loose by care,

“ So near were these, strewn lightly o’er the green,

- “ Through daily custom long abused, or wine  
“ Whence mirth will oft grow mad—the flowers were seen  
“ That cooled their bowls, or crowned with wreaths  
    their hair.
- “ Traced far away, till narrowed to a line,  
“ The royal river rolls its ample tide—  
“ In smoother channels, sparkling as they glide,  
“ ’Twixt fields refreshed, he sends his progeny  
“ Diffused like tangled branches from the vine.
- “ With clamorous throat outstretched, unheard so  
        high,
- “ The bittern flies afar, yet finds no rest  
“ Nor where to stoop—a tent is o’er the place  
“ In which she built her solitary nest—  
“ But God will render all she lost, again—  
“ Deep pools and sedgy fens her home shall be,  
“ More sheltered room to multiply her race,  
“ A larger choice of silence on the plain,  
“ Range wide enough from human injury !  
“ Within these walls the island beast shall dwell,



“Owls cry, satyrs dance, all evil things increase,  
“All doleful creatures roam the house of Bel,  
“And dragons fill their pleasant palaces!”\*

As one self-tired with early haste, stands still,  
Or turns to look behind him, and survey  
By so much distance since he paused o’ercome,  
How far as yet his progress up the hill  
Whose summit once attained is rest and home—  
Leans on his staff awhile, with aching knee,  
Then breathed, takes heart, and straight pursues his  
way—

Thus stopped, but soon with lighter spirit he.

“’Twixt earth and sky, as resting on the line  
“Which seems a limit to them both, descends  
“The ill-worshipped sun—when first God’s sovereign  
ray  
“Touched the fresh orb with fire, and made it shine,  
“—Our greater light—no more—though great it be—  
“Set to divide the hours, not snare mankind—

\* Isaiah, ch. viii.

“ At once, behold ! that mighty concourse bends,

“ All hushed, those noisy myriads turn and pray !

“ O skilled to render doubts and prophecies !

“ Priests—sages—seers ! far-sighted midst the blind !

“ Soothsayers that teach men prescience—great are ye !

“ Behold, your trust is present to your eyes !

“ Before you, where ye kneel, Bel’s chariot shines,

“ The summit of his temple smokes behind !

“ Look back—what means that cloud ? ye read less  
signs !

“ This most behoves to know—interpret this—

“ Awake—stand up ! who turns or tarries—dies !

“ Ten thousand arrows fly, and none can miss—

“ Now swiftly speed your wheels !—from every gate

“ Chaldæa’s princes urge their steeds with cries.

“ —Ah, what avail their oracles ! the shield

“ Is lost, or cast aside, or found too late !

“ Belshazzar’s ensigns glitter in the field—

“ Their craft ends here—who fastest flees is wise !

“ Rash boasts erewhile ! vain menaces ! by fear

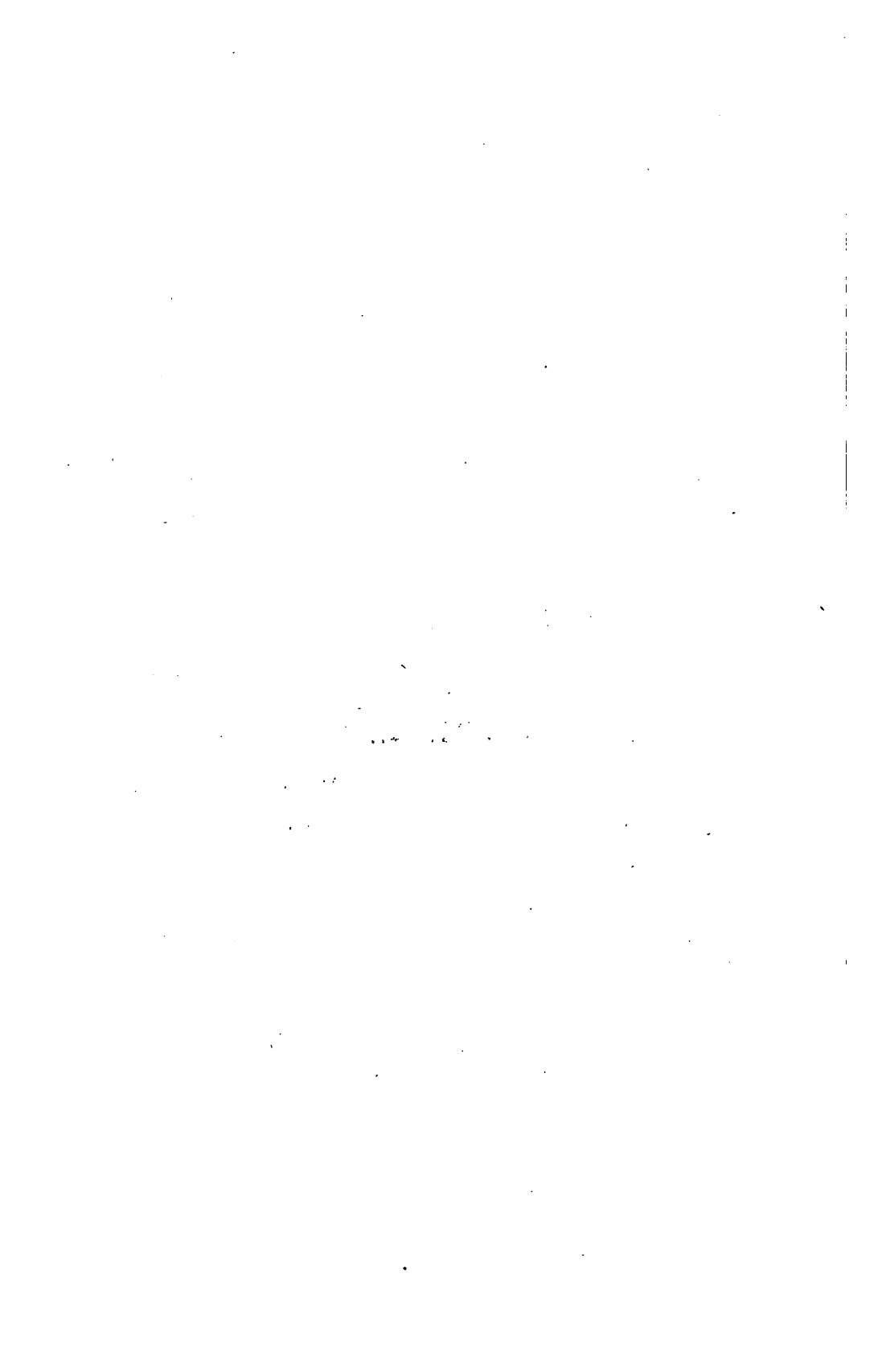
“ The herald’s summons dwindles to a scream ;  
“ And prayer breaks off, till safer hours delayed,—  
“ No more to soft and amorous songs we hear  
“ The lute or viol sounding by the stream,  
“ With distant murmurings in the large-leaved shade :  
“ Their vessels and their flowery crowns half-twined,  
“ Are all deserted ; on the ground they lie  
“ With scattered robes stained red in wine and blood.  
“ The champion casts his challenge on the wind,  
“ And turns his chariot wheels in haste to fly ;  
“ The wrestler leaves his garland where he stood—  
“ The priest forsakes his God—the victim springs  
“ From off the altar—trappings, standards, beds  
“ Are mixed and overthrown ! O now for wings !  
“ Now for the griffin’s scales—the swallow’s speed—  
“ So to escape above the infinite heads  
“ Of tardier multitudes confused ! The steed,  
“ Wild with their cries, bursts through—Belshazzar  
    spreads  
“ His slaughters thick behind him, till the star

- “ Is brightening where the blue light fades—abroad,  
“ By many an inroad deep, we trace his car  
“ Driving their flocks in heaps. The Median sword  
“ Can scarce at last, with all its subject kings,  
“ Turn from those dim pavilions where it waves  
“ Pollution and the bloody edge of war :  
“ High even there Chaldæa’s trumpet rings ;  
“ Till night hides all, the dubious conflict raves  
“ Awhile without spectators uninclined.  
“ Neither did Cyrus follow when the host  
“ Returned with trophies gathered by the way—  
“ Arms, garments, chariots, captives left behind,  
“ And cups for divination—gods were lost  
“ As well as priests—so vain their flight to-day !  
“ Bel’s image meets the conqueror at his gates :  
“ Loud music goes before, and herald’s loud  
“ To-morrow’s feast proclaiming—with the boast  
“ Of ever-during peace henceforth. The towers  
“ Are crowned with light—some new procession waits :  
“ Street after street encompassed by the crowd—

“ Matrons with hymns, and virgins bold as they,  
“ Dance round the chariot wheels, or deck with flowers  
“ The steeds which bring them victory. In their song,  
“ ‘ To Bel the holiest, first, is praise assigned—  
“ ‘ And, next, to him who fills our fanes with prey,  
“ ‘ To thee, Belshazzar, glory—endless hours  
“ ‘ Of youth and bliss—for gods are blessed and young—  
“ ‘ Hail! earth’s almighty Lord! hail! patron of  
mankind!’ ”

# **THE IMPIOUS FEAST.**

## **BOOK II.**



# THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

## BOOK II.

---

HE ended here, and both awhile were still,  
As troubled by perplexing thoughts. At last,  
With eyes upraised, she spake—"Our time is this:  
"The seventy years that Judah should fulfil  
"In bondage unredeemed have passed away—  
"And earth has kept its sabbaths. Wrath holds fast  
"On sin through generations—Moab's hiss,  
"Hath joined with Ammon's mockery—loud were they!  
"The strong may bruise us yet, the proud deride—  
"God could remember all his threats—and will



- “ The curse foretold beyond its years abide ?  
“ His terrors still endure—his love alone decay !”  
“ O peace ! beware !”—the offended Elder cried—  
“ Impute not evil to the Lord ! repent,  
“ That grief provokes distrustfulness ! Is he  
“ Averse from mercy—heedless while we pray—  
“ Or less inclined toward grace than punishment ?  
“ Alas, Ailona ! ill-ruled thoughts are these !  
“ His eye regards our weakness though we stray ;  
“ He marks the contrite tears and loosened knees—  
“ Else woe to words like thine—and fools so rash as we !  
“ Who shall reproach or limit him ? The plain  
“ Where front to front earth’s angry nations stood  
“ So late, with all their kings, may hide its blood,  
“ And soon confound the traces of the slain :  
“ Where Median Cyrus heard his trumpets blow  
“ An early salutation due at morn—  
“ O’er vacant fields Bel’s wandering steers may low,  
“ And songs delight its village hinds again—  
“ The lover’s lute resound, or peaceful shepherd’s horn !

“Ourselves change most—yea, all things change below—  
“Strength, wisdom, beauty, grandeur, riches, fame :  
“There is but One immutable—whose will  
“Stands unreversed and unperturbed—still  
“Above man’s thought, yet softening toward his prayer :  
“Part of that will it is which hearkens thus—  
“Free, yet by love’s necessity the same—  
“Most steadfast when the most inclined to us—  
“Truth never stoops, and wisdom cannot err !  
“These, if we mark or not, their task fulfil,  
“And go right on.

“O shame upon the old !

“Whom gain hath taught to tarry patiently—  
“Not faith or humble peace from God—but gold  
“And foul usurious traffic ! Such as cry,  
“ ‘ Behold a fruitful land—a wholesome clime—  
“ ‘ With means enough to live ! These walls deride  
“ ‘ The wrath of armies or the waste of time !  
“ ‘ Will Media drink the ancient river dry  
“ ‘ To search their deep foundations ? will she climb

“ ‘ The thousand towers above them?—Tell her pride,  
 “ ‘ Beyond the arrows flight they rise, and far  
 “ ‘ Their needless bulk remote from injury  
 “ ‘ Stands solid in its structure, lofty, wide,  
 “ ‘ With waste of strength—for wonder more than war—  
 “ ‘ Sufficient in itself—secure unfortified,  
 “ ‘ If Cyrus, midst the plain, with all his host  
 “ ‘ Drawn forth to battle.’ This since eve they say—  
 “ ‘ Fought till the darkness, nor could then prevail,  
 “ ‘ Prolonging dubious strife with greater cost  
 “ ‘ If he have seen no weakness—no dismay—  
 “ ‘ No flight before him—only mutual wounds,  
 “ ‘ And more than equal slaughter—will he scale  
 “ ‘ The city’s gates?—their bars were loosed to-day,  
 “ ‘ Belshazzar went to seek him.’ Louder sounds  
 “ ‘ The ill-omened tongue at such a time : we hear  
 “ ‘ Of straitness in the Median tents, and dearth  
 “ ‘ Which grows amain ; while present wisdom here  
 “ ‘ Hath gathered plenty from the lavish earth,  
 “ ‘ Hoarding its fruits for years—heaped garner high

“ With corn, and wine, and oil,—till every street  
“ Throughout the whole is filled with strength and bread.  
“ ‘ Israel’—they say—‘ is sinful, stubborn yet—  
“ ‘ God, ill-approached by clamorous misery  
“ ‘ Which will not wait, abhors the hands we spread,  
“ ‘ Polluted as they are, and turns his face  
“ ‘ From what we suffer—justly to defer  
“ ‘ The promise that he made us, or abase  
“ ‘ The proud who claim unthankfully!’—They err,  
“ Scattering distrustful thoughts midst cautious words,  
“ And numbering worse men’s sins to hide their own.  
“ Self-blinded hypocrites are these!—Of old,  
“ Waters perchance as deep have dried elsewhere;  
“ Bulwarks as safe have fallen; by spears or swords  
“ Untouched, proud hosts have perished! Let them groan  
“ As if his arm were short whose flock we are—  
“ A remnant saved shall rest within their fold;  
“ Truth cannot lie—and victory is the Lord’s.”

Rising he spoke—nor aught returned the maid  
Rebuked and meekly humbled: both went forth,

To listen if now the city's tumult laid,  
There might be space ere daylight for repose.  
Lo ! eight slant lines of light divide the north,  
Whence distant bellowings riot to their ears—  
Oblique, yet pointing equally, in rows,  
Eight arrowy streaks of trembling fire arise :  
Each less in length than that beneath, uprears  
Its western end, still narrowing as it goes—  
Aspiring and ascending each appears,  
The first to rest on earth, the last to pierce the skies.

Yet higher than even the highest, and brighter glows  
A crown, for such the sparkling summit wears,  
Like all heaven's stars collected :—from her eyes  
Some mournful drops the wondering virgin clears ;  
O'er walls, and through the cedar-branches, he  
In conscious haste uplifts his sight, and cries,  
“ We see their flames—but not the tower accurst—  
“ Yet, Lord ! thine anger sleeps—no lightning stirs !  
“ That mountain height threatens heaven and wars with  
thee !

“ They toil to tempt their Maker as at first,  
“ Now worse—since warned ! Bel’s drunken worshippers  
“ Gird with their fires his temple eight times round,  
“ Stage after stage, long journeying up the side,  
“ O’er those broad pathways which our eyes discern  
“ So plain by day—and carry from the ground  
“ Lamps, cressets, torches toward thy throne defied.  
“ Alas, how long !—would the huge bulk might burn !  
“ Haste—let us hence.”

The virgin turned once more,  
Trimmed her neglected lamp, then smoothly spread  
The couch beneath him, placed the table near,  
Poured water for his hands, and strewed the floor  
With leaves and myrtle-blossoms. Next unleavened  
bread

In rush-wove baskets brought she—of the year  
Figs, dates, nuts, almonds—honey too, and wine  
Drawn from their homely flasks, she set before—  
And would, so used, have added to his cheer  
The smile which sweetens food—but in its stead,

Grief, mastering will, dispersed the transient sign  
Of peace, and tears burst forth. Perplexed, he gazed;  
So one whose thoughts are earlier than the day,  
Intent abroad, looks wistful from his shed,  
And sees the watery dawn a moment shine—  
Yet scarce a moment—round the mountain's head;  
O'er eastern woods the dusky veil upraised,  
And purer skies behind their edges gray—  
Then girds his loins in hope, and speeds along:  
But soon those rosy streaks are hidden again,  
Mists climb about the mountain's side—the gale  
Is white with sleet—ill-perched on restless spray  
The drooping bird breaks off her early song—  
More chill the wind, more sharply beats the rain,  
And swifter torrents riot through the vale

The Elder's heart beat heavily—"A curse  
" Seems strong against our peace to-night,"—he cried—  
" Grief grows and generates grief; impatient pain  
" Augments itself; ill thoughts recoil on worse,  
" As dread runs back toward danger. Weak and old,

“ Yet still so rash!—what part have I with pride!  
“ If folly rave thus loud, God hears above,  
“ And can rebuke, by wiser lips, the bold:  
“ Why should I fret my soul at sin, and bear  
“ The daily burden of unkindness home,  
“ Provoking tears, and wearying what I love!  
“ Forgive me, child!—it is a night of fear  
“ To both—and both spake heedlessly—but come,  
“ Sit down by me and eat.” The patient maid  
Who caused his sighs, seemed angry with her own,  
So hard to rule by force, or hide at will.  
His calmer brow she kissed, then meekly said—  
“ In solitude, or worse—for not alone,  
“ Nor without cause to fear—I watched since eve,  
“ Perplexed as thou by presages of ill  
“ At once, and ill indeed. My spirit to-day  
“ Has toiled, as do the sick, or they that grieve  
“ Midst wastes or forests, in dreams, by difficult ways  
“ Treading the sand knee-deep—compelled to stray  
“ Unwaked till morn and daylight come.” Amaze



Seemed rather through his eyes than lips, to say;  
—If not alone, how else?—"Beyond the gate"—  
With voice abated yet, the maid replied—  
"When thou didst part, I stood a space, to gaze;  
"And ere I closed it, tarried on the sill:  
"Whether its bars were fast or not, the thought  
"Has fled from that which followed—but I sat  
"Self-tasked till eve—for endless, as it seemed,  
"—Delayed, resumed, neglected, cast aside,  
"As if time's lapse unravell'd what I wrought—  
"That sabbath robe was left to shame me still.  
"At length the work sped swiftly, and toil so light  
"Bred light thoughts too, while prosperous fancy dreamed  
"I scarce know what, in furtherance of my pains—  
"Truth, fable, both, with old and half-sung rhymes:  
"Such voluntary labour earns delight,  
"If nothing else—remitted and resumed,  
"Those songs delayed me not. Our holier strains  
"And royal prophecies were mixed at times;  
"Others of later grief—God's house consumed,

- “ Himself renouncing it—the lion’s might  
“ Subdued, and Judah patient in his chains !  
“ One taught me by thyself I sang at last,  
“ But still by starts imperfectly—the same  
“ Which tells thy father’s triumphs ere he died,  
“ When mailed in giant arms, with lighted brand,  
“ That red Chaldean, Bel’s prime sorcerer came,  
“ First through God’s courts blaspheming, while the blast  
“ Of heathen trumpets filled them, and the flame  
“ Uprose o’er all—even in his might and pride,  
“ Azaiel smote him—though his own right hand  
“ Wax’d feeble then, and death was o’er his eyes.  
“ Midst this, which most seems ours of all our melodies,  
“ The door closed softly, as if entering here  
“ Stood one intent to hearken—like the old  
“ With feet dragged slow. My face meanwhile was bent  
“ On labours which required both eyes and mind—  
“ Long braids involved, and plaitings manifold.  
“ Thou, Sabra, oft hast tarried in secret near  
“ While some such strain of Judah’s punishment

- “ Passed, as I deemed, unheeded to the wind.  
“ To-day, midst broidered leaves and fruits of gold,  
“ The setting sunbeam smote my web entwined  
“ With flowers and intricate stems on purple soil;  
“ And from its twisted threads to look around  
“ Had marred the whole, or wasted days of toil.  
“ Again those footsteps moved, and close behind  
“ Breathings but ill-suppressed, whose depth betrayed  
“ Sorrow or haste—hence too methought the sound  
“ Rose from thyself, nor dreamed I but the shade  
“ Which fell so darkly o’er my task, was thine.  
“ ‘ Thus soon returned ?’—I asked. No voice replied,  
“ ‘ Though what was there stood near me.—‘ Lo ! thy  
    cloak—  
“ ‘ If any need of that—thy cloak,’—I cried—  
“ ‘ Lies on the bench hard by.’ Nor word, nor sign  
“ As yet made answer—what I said was vain—  
“ That shadow tarried still. Once more I spoke—  
“ ‘ The Sun will fail me soon,’—but not aside  
“ Turned thence who listened, nor said aught again.

“ I looked at last, and scarce with more surprise  
“ She whom rejected Saul compelled at night  
“ In Endor, since all holier help was lost,  
“ To call the prophet up; beheld his shade arise,  
“ And knew her king : or heard with more affright—  
“ ‘ To-morrow thou shalt be with me—thine host  
“ ‘ Shalt fall before thy foes ! ’ ”

She paused, and on her cheek,  
Despoiled of all its roses, pale and cold,  
Imagination wrought like death. "Still speak,"  
Adjured the impatient Elder, while his eye,  
In desperate speed forerunning what she told,  
Was fixed on hers, and strained to extacy.  
"Here—close as this,"—once more his child began :  
"Above the couch on which I rest me now,  
"A woman—for her garments, hair, and breast  
"Looked most like woman's, else she seemed a man  
"In strength and stature, voice, deportment, hue—  
"A woman stood behind, her right hand prest,  
"As if in pain, upon her burning brow ;

“ Her left, so withered, that the light blushed through,  
“ Outstretched on high, had cut the sunbeam short,  
“ And shadowed half my web. Loose waved her hair—  
“ Her vest was dark, but figured, like the night,  
“ With clouds and crimson stars—of every sort  
“ From reptile tribes, were foul things imaged there—  
“ All creatures dismal to the thought or sight,  
“ Some fleeing and some pursuing. Lizards—asps—  
“ The snake—the cockatrice—what others dread,  
“ She wore for ornament.”

The Elder clasps

His palms, and lifts them groaning o'er his head :  
“ Before I hear it, accursed be the charm !  
“ May all her cruel thoughts fall wide !—O child !  
“ I would make strong my soul with this !” he says—  
And thus the maid : “ She seemed possessed, or crazed  
“ By some ill spirit—there was no mind to harm.  
“ Once, as I thought, that dreadful visage smiled,  
“ And promises she gave of happier days  
“ To us and Israel. Sounds by madness raised,

“ And tuneless incantations, which the tongue  
“ Uttered unguided, were her spells ! Afraid,  
“ At random rhymes ere heard ! Are echos sorceries ?  
“ For while I gazed she muttered back my song,  
“ Mistaking or corrupting what I said.

‘ O ! hear me, father—haste ! O haste !  
‘ The gates are burst—the temple waste !  
‘ Thy breath is lengthening to a sigh !  
‘ Thine hands are weak, and dark thine eyes ;  
‘ The spoiler comes, the flames arise ;  
‘ God’s courts are filled with blasphemies—  
‘ The foe is in his sanctuary !  
‘ Blood drops upon the pavement fast—  
‘ Before the veil a victim dies !  
‘ Thy blood runs there—and thine the last—  
‘ Thyself his latest sacrifice.  
‘ Repentance, mercy, life, are past :  
‘ Now, father, haste !—O strike—and die ! ”

She saw the Elder stoop, so spake no more :

Can he too change and tremble ? Shame forbid !

O ! faith and pious zeal forbid ! The sneer  
From poisonous tongues, even all life through, he bore ;  
Helpless old age, and solitude unblest,  
Better perchance than happier natures did.  
Perplexed and hedged about with much to fear,  
While some less tempted failed—this impious pest  
Comes hell-directed last, and dreaded most !  
His face he turned in misery toward the floor,  
Nor raised it when he answered : “ Haste to fly !  
“ Remorse pursues her steps—sin runs before—  
“ Who meets, or passing looks behind, is lost—  
“ For all that hear her, trust—that trust her, die ! ”  
“ Sabra arise ! ” the wondering virgin cried :  
“ She hath not harmed me—wherefore should I dread ?  
“ Beyond the reach of help, I might have died,  
“ And thou returned in time to find the dead,  
“ With nothing in the silent house beside !  
“ Alone I sat—who saved me from her then ?  
“ These are but dreams in age’s sleep—awake !  
“ Drive out such shadows as the scorn of men.

“ Her hand was on my neck and o’er my head ;  
“ She neither harmed nor threatened me—but spake  
“ Like one amazed or mad.” Then Sabra thus :  
“ I know her, what she is, and would not trust—  
“ Yea, though her lips rained prayers. The weak like us,  
“ Encompassed by no human arts, partake  
“ In impious mysteries of blood and lust,  
“ Till witchcraft binds them soul with soul to her—  
“ So hell becomes more great. Those lips have power !  
“ Crazed, as she seems, such madness will not err !—  
“ There is a pause near death, when men grown bold  
“ Toward all things else, have struggled with her chain—  
“ Numbering the minutes of that fearful hour !  
“ Though sworn as slaves to sin, and sealed of old,  
“ They knew that death must yield them back to pain,  
“ If what they spake went forth, forced up by spells  
“ Even from the grave, to endure her wrath again.  
“ Yet have they told their children ere they slept  
“ Such deafening tales of charms and sorceries  
“ Practiced before them in her midnight cells,



“ That innocent feet might turn from what they feared,  
“ As none dare utter or think whose heart is kept  
“ By Him that cleanses ere he sanctifies.  
“ To shun, not follow, I sought—and yet have heard  
“ What vexed for years my slumbers with affright.  
“ If thou wouldst keep thy thoughts more pure—thine eyes  
“ From shades that scare the strong, consume the weak,  
“ And dreadful visions through the afflicted night,  
“ Child—never look that way !” She hears him speak,  
Long silent when his words have ceased. As light,  
If sun-struck mirrors shake upon the wall,  
Fluttering o’er floor and roof, a vagrant streak  
From face to face along the pictured hall,  
Illumines none, yet skims and touches all :  
Remembrance flashes through the virgin’s breast ;  
Far more than wonder kindles on her cheek.  
Thus wheels the dubious sea-bird ere she fall,  
Nor hastes to leave, yet knows not where to rest.  
“ Extorted truth has dropped from impious tongues—  
“ The wicked have looked farther than the just,

“ And things as strange been learnt through words  
unblest!

“ Those cannot sin who neither seek nor trust—

“ She came unbidden—a Sorceress with her songs!

“ Charms let them be then—if I heard the verse,

“ False oracles have answered wisely—Hell

“ Hath made its forced confessions—Balaam brought

“ From Aram in the East his purchased curse,

“ Which turned to prayers and blessings while it fell.”

As one that tarries till his heart o'erfraught,  
Can find no utterance through his lips, the Sire  
Watched while she mused bewildered: thus desire  
To learn the certainty of what men dread,  
Hinders their asking; but like those who wake  
When some voice calls them ere their sleep is past,  
The starting virgin lifted up her head,  
Perplexed, a moment, and ashamed—then spake:  
“ That threatening face was o'er me where I sat:  
“ On eyes hard fixed her eyes as fixed were cast.  
“ Both speechless, breathless, motionless, we gazed:  
“ And when upon my feet I rose—for late,

- “ Through fear, I tried to rise, yet stood at last—  
“ She awed my lips from utterance with a sign,  
“ Took both my hands in hers, and held them wide  
“ High overhead, with parted palms, upraised :  
“ Then, while the roof-beams shook, her hoarse voice  
cried—  
“ ‘ That song shall be remembered—learn thou mine.’  
    ‘ Daughter of captive Israel, hear !  
        ‘ The time grows short, the sun will fail ;  
    ‘ Be strong, be glad, who hates may fear—  
    ‘ The Queen of Queens that robe shall wear—  
        ‘ Let Haza burn, Beari wail !  
    ‘ I see the trembling nations bow—  
    ‘ Chaldæa’s crown is on thy brow :  
        ‘ Lo ! Judah rests in Jordan’s vale !  
    ‘ Visions of glory bright and near,  
    ‘ And kings that kneel to thee, appear—  
    ‘ The Queen of Queens that robe shall wear !  
        ‘ Daughter of rescued Israel, hail !’  
“ Thus, when the chaunt was ended, from her zone  
“ A vial of gold she took, and o’er my hair

“ Unbraided then, poured ointment. Early flowers,  
“ If gathered ere the dew goes off, or blown  
“ While earth, at eve, steams warm with new-fallen  
showers,  
“ I falsely deemed its sweetest things: there are  
“ Who tell of bdellium and the Arabian spice,  
“ Borne far by embassies midst robes and gems  
“ To conquerors feared, as more perchance in price  
“ Than all the pearls which stud their diadems—  
“ But nothing, sure, will equal that again!  
“ It filled the house with fragrance—and before  
“ My lips could move to question her, she said:  
“ ‘ To-morrow thou wilt believe me—peace till then.’  
“ Even with her words I heard the closing door  
“ And parting feet.”

“ These rhymes are sorceries, maid!

“ Hooks barbed beneath, and baited to betray!”  
Replied the afflicted Elder:—“ Credulous ears  
“ Receive with dread the whisperings of her art—  
“ With dread at first—yet cannot turn away!

“ Would she report good tidings in our tears,  
“ Or health to us?—of twofold sense be they,  
“ And point as if toward truth, but all athwart  
“ End far remote in fallacies. Our weal  
“ To her were bitterness: of other clay  
“ Than man’s she seems—an alien from his lot,  
“ Touched by no human sympathies to feel  
“ The slow relentings of the obdurate heart  
“ At last inclined. With us she worships not.  
“ Nay, more—the very servants of her courts  
“ And devilish altars, though they crowd them still,  
“ Whose weary being she shortens or supports,  
“ Enforced to watch and wait—yet loath her will,  
“ Hinting their curses in each other’s ears:  
“ Few ever went with equal speed aright—  
“ Sin runs apace, but hard the load it bears!  
“ These now would tread the backward path from ill,  
“ And flee the imperious Mistress if they might.  
“ Men call her Maala, with encumbered breath,  
“ Eyes cast in dread behind, and dimmed by tears—

“ That sound can overtake the wings of time,  
“ Stir vain remorse, edge sharper hopeless fears,  
“ Apply, but all too late, the scourge and goad,  
“ And urge the mournful memory of crime.  
“ Hell’s mightiest minister is she—beneath  
“ The huge foundations of that clay-built hill ;  
“ Bel’s blasted glory,—stands her dark abode.  
“ No human step unbidden may pass the sill,  
“ Or trespass twice through passages and caves  
“ Whose dreary mazes lead at last to death.  
“ There crawls the impatient asp unseen—the toad  
“ Has room in which to hide—the clamorous owl  
“ Flits from strange fires—the hoarse hyena raves—  
“ On slimy floors snakes hiss and scorpions sting :  
“ All noisome beasts, all reptile tribes impure  
“ Contend yet multiply ; while night’s dun fowl  
“ Beat the low caverns with continuous wing,  
“ And fan, in restless flight, the sunless air.  
“ Time lapses undistinguished still—secure  
“ Beyond the strength of brazen doors or walls,

“ As Queen she holds her bloody festivals,  
“ And halves the hideous empire with Despair.  
“ Nor yet the living only—those misled  
“ By spells and sorceries, approach—her guests :  
“ Beings strange to nature hear the unnatural call  
“ Which lifts the slumberer from his painful bed—  
“ The soul that sleeps and dreams, but never rests—  
“ Whate’er resembles death, yet cannot die—  
“ Shades of a thousand forms, and each of dread :  
“ All images of impious thought, and all  
“ Which thought could never image—treacherous Fear,  
“ Obdurate Wrath, relentless Blasphemy,  
“ Hate, Envy, Vengeance, Pride—in flocks appear,  
“ To revel fiercely round the affrighted hall.  
“ Impenitent Remorse suspends its sigh  
“ And sins yet more—Lust makes a truce with Pain—  
“ Things human also—whether at her cry  
“ They warm their dust and visit earth again  
“ In corporal substance truly, or her skill,  
“ Which rests its power so far on fallacy,

“ Can stain their shadows to what hue she will—  
“ Mixed in tumultuous hymns, with impious din  
“ Mysterious sabbaths keeping ; all things good,  
“ Changed to their dreadful opposites of sin,  
“ Pollute her banquets with offence and blood.  
“ Here children, bound before the altars, wait  
“ And listen wondering to her dreadful rhymes :  
“ Rapt in tormenting trance the spirit stands  
“ Which strives against her now, or mourns too late  
“ Its past communion with forsaken crimes—  
“ Too late—and far too feebly to repent—  
“ She feasts the while, and with accursed hands  
“ Distributes where she lists her grace or punishment.”  
He paused, when thus the maid : “ Our infant sleep  
“ Ends with reproachful terrors, and the faith  
“ Still lingers on till age—disowned—yet why ?  
“ If, midst the unfruitful vales and tideless deep  
“ Of that still world, whose nearest gate is death—  
“ For ever shut to all but those who die—  
“ Such beings as these, or worse, abide within



“ Till incantations set their malice free,  
“ And bid them from their dreary confines run,  
“ The strong and ready ministers of sin ?”  
“ We judge things hidden,” he said, “ by those we see ;  
“ This world were else scarce broad enough for Fear :  
“ Darkness conceals what shown before the sun  
“ Would blast our natural sight ; yet such appear  
“ To those whose eyes are quickened by her power  
“ Round midnight fires and lamps that burn for ever.  
“ With desperate hands some move the unsocial door—  
“ Who watch suspense, through centuries, the hour  
“ When time or nature changes—these endeavour  
“ To breathe awhile earth’s freshness—feel the wind,  
“ And see the places where they dwelt, once more.  
“ Others would pass from us toward them, and strive  
“ Impatient while their steps are yet confined  
“ Within the threshold of this visible world—  
“ Envyng forbidden things, even while they live  
“ Would wander through the sad and twilight plain  
“ Which spreads ’twixt life and death—whose frontiers  
reach

“ From light to darkness ; where, confusedly hurled,  
“ All things are mixed and moving, false and vain ;  
“ Gross shades and bodies substanceless ; so these,  
“ From both worlds alien, come like spies to each,  
“ Thence learn and tell obscurely. Daughter, here  
“ Prevails the imputed curse, and sorcerer’s reign,  
“ Broad-fronted midst their fiendish deities.  
“ What else were good, is hollow : vigilance, grace,  
“ And wisdom blighted ere its fruits appear :  
“ Thus sights half seen, foreknowledge out of place,  
“ False prophecies part true—unnatural ways,  
“ Unholy mixtures !—Priests buy bread with praise,  
“ And sell for gold their blessings—Sorcerers dream  
“ As kings instruct them—subject nations bring  
“ The tribute of unrighteousness, and teach  
“ To worship Rach with dances by the stream,  
“ Adrammalech with slaughter. Vainly ring  
“ —Though loud and frequent in regardless ears—  
“ From every street the widow’s prayer and cry :  
“ All shun the fallen whose grasp endangers each :  
“ So Babylon is choked with blood and tears !”

He ended here ; in thought the virgin sat  
At first, then spake : “ But what avails to fly  
“ If witchcraft move the interdicted gate  
“ Which shuts this world from hell—or she whose breath  
“ Can call the offending spirit from its rest,  
“ To endure a harder punishment than death,  
“ Forcing the dust to know its misery,  
“ If she so swift pursue ?” The Elder thus :  
“ Dread fraud, not force—for God, who hears the oppress,  
“ Will conquer strength with strength—deceit and guile  
“ He leaves to prove the wisest, search the best ;  
“ And warning all, he helps the weak like us.  
“ Ourselves seduce ourselves—tempt not her snare  
“ Where Sin hath power—midst solitude. The smile  
“ Of such a face blasts deadliest. Child ! beware  
“ Henceforth !—it is for life. There rests, alas !  
“ Half yet to tell ; but sorrow, and the day  
“ Now near, forbid. This heaviness may pass,  
“ And God vouchsafe to hear us. We will pray :  
“ Prayer cleanses what is tainted ; what is pure

“ Confirms and freshens still : our con’rite sighs

“ Ascend to Him as incense, blessed in this

“ Beyond all gifts—above all sacrifice—

“ They do not fail or perish, but will endure

“ Till one great offering end all tears in bliss,

“ And make the altar holier whence they rise !”

So teaching, from above, the grieved old man  
Reached harp and lute, and lightly o’er their chords  
In prelude brief, his practised fingers ran ;  
Then both, for both were skilled, gave sorrow words.

STROPHE.

Just Shepherd of a flock dispersed ! thy might  
Sustains us, or we perish ! pitying Thou  
Dost mark the captive’s groan, the orphan’s tear ;  
Preserve our thoughts from evil through the night,  
Our erring thoughts from sin, our hearts from fear !  
Far scattered from thy fold, protect us now—  
A captive exile seeks to pray aright :  
Father, look down ! an orphan child is here !

## ANTISTROPHE.

We have no strength or knowledge, righteous Lord !  
Beyond our daily wants we cannot see—  
Help Thou ! for Thou alone canst keep and guide !  
Give us thy peace, enlighten us with thy word ;  
Frail as we are—our might and wisdom be !  
Ah ! what in worms that crawl the dust—were pride ?  
But Thou art great ! O be thy name adored !  
The powers of darkness cannot reach to Thee !

## STROPHE.

He makes his paths across the breadth of heaven  
Amongst the planted stars ! Ye stars declare,  
And thou, O sun ! for He hath placed you there  
To witness what his hands have freely given—  
And see his judgments on the unjust and proud,  
How bright above your orbs his skirts appear,  
Yea, though obscured and darkened in the cloud !

## ANTISTROPHE.

Sovereign of Quick and Dead ! before His face  
The winged lightnings run, and swift behind

The voice of thunders threatening in the wind :  
His steeds are as the whirlwinds ! who shall trace  
God's chariot-wheels tempestuous through the sky !  
O ! who amidst the waters, who shall find  
The dark pavilion where he sits on high ?



**THE IMPIOUS FEAST.**

**BOOK III.**





# THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

## BOOK III.

---

WHEN Morn arose on Babylon, she came  
At first with dewy freshness, pale and chill :  
Like beauty yet uncoloured by the flame  
Which love soon lights and perfects with. The sun  
Beyond his orient confine tarried still,  
And in the misty azure, one by one,  
Were all night's fires receding. Toward the east  
Heaven kindles, and the tower which looks midway  
'Twixt earth and sky—whence Bel's expectant priest  
Sees ere the world yet wakes, his course begun

And hails an earlier dawn, a longer day—  
Glow's first among men's works, as most approved  
Or mightiest, in the brightness of its god.

Safe on that mountain built with hands, her brood  
The eagle leaves, and o'er their home beloved,  
Where Bel gives all things refuge as his guests—  
A sanctuary from human injuries—  
Round and still round its crimson summit flies,  
Or poised above, on even pinion rests  
In the pure light and cool blue firmament—  
City and plain unveiling to her eyes  
The marble dome, the many-coloured tent  
—Dispersed upon a sea of mist as isles—  
Illumined groves and palaces. In air,  
High as she soars, ascend earth's enmities  
As high: the daily carnage that defiles,  
Steams to her subtle nostril, with the scent  
Of last night's blood, not undistinguished there.  
Now speeds the turret's watchman from his post,  
And early sandals sound along the street:

With robe succinctly girt, and resolute feet,  
Followed by kind upbraidings from his host,  
The traveller bids farewell, then hastes away :  
His home is on the city's farthest side,  
A full day's journey yet, though part be crost ;  
Prayed to relent, and flattered to abide,  
He must no farther hear, he will no longer stay.

There was a naked greatness in those times  
Hidden with the mist of ages, or descried  
Dimly at best by us from far divided climes  
Whence runs apace the never-refluent tide,  
Bearing their mighty wrecks beyond our ken .  
Parts—and fair parts—of this fair universe,  
Nearer to nature were the works of men,  
Themselves more like her children. Not averse,  
Estranged, perverted, reprobate—as now  
The populous city wakes to pant and toil  
Midst loathsome trades, confused with noise and smoke :  
Across the imperial brightness of her brow  
There passed no cloudy stain, no sordid soil,

No shade impure when Babylon awoke,  
No scowl, O queen ! of care, no look like want hadst  
thou !

Before their thresholds, in the ruddy light,  
Thy children swarm with fragrant boughs and flowers,  
Suspending bridal coronets above :  
The year begins, and spring is in her pride !  
Spears are entwined with garlands—helmets bright  
Gleam from the lintel—war in those soft hours  
Reclines a willing guest at pleasure's side,  
And lends his arms as ornaments to love.  
The everlasting Serpent weds the Dove—  
Thus idly dreams that old idolatry—  
Bel celebrates a three-day's festival,  
While pale Astarte casts the Cestus by,  
Yielding the god her beauty. Earth and sky  
With both rejoice, whose blessings reach to all—  
Two potent sexes all their realms supply,  
Whence nature hath its just fertility.

Their procreant fire both earth and heaven pervades,

Warming the watery shoals ; and from the air  
Its vagrant tribes, else free, to nest or hive  
With soft compulsion forcing : through the shades  
Of forest wild it spreads—o'er deserts bare—  
To make life multiply, and all things live :  
All but where life and death are one below—  
The fierce accord, the fearful trust and pair,  
Angel for angel burns, and brute for brute—  
On soils subdued the genial harvests grow ;  
Those which man's foot ne'er trod conceive and bear—  
The seed becomes a plant, the blossom turns to fruit.

Such Fables weave they shadowing truth, and this  
No time to question falsehood. Bel begins  
With larger pomp his customary feasts,  
Triumphant yesterday. Who shares his bliss  
Augments his glory—who loves temperance sins,  
Envious against his honour and his priests,  
That prosper not unless men learn to give :  
The god is gracious when his servants thrive !  
“ Bring wine, build altars, burn the fat of beasts—

“ Three morns and eves, augmenting till they close,  
“ Love may range wide at will—amidst their pride  
“ Bel has consumed his enemies ! to-day  
“ Renewed in virgin youth, Astarte glows,  
“ Blushing with rosier beauty from his ray—  
“ Behold ! the Bridegroom comes ! approach with gifts  
the Bride !”

Thus teach they through the streets, where slowly ride  
Grave herald's scarlet-clothed with chains of gold,  
Deputed majesty, whose trappings flow  
Even to their camel's feet. On either side  
Bareheaded youths the gilded sceptres hold ;  
Judges before, and bearded elders go  
Adorned with ivory wands and signet rings :  
Still as they move, their light-toned cornets blow,  
Then pause while thus the sovereign will is told :  
“ All tribes, all nations, languages, and kings !  
“ Three days Belshazzar makes his sacrifice—  
“ The third he feasts with Bel. Ye princes rise !  
“ Before his throne your hands ye people spread,

“ Through whose good gift are spoils and victories ;  
“ At whose rebuke the rebel Median fled.  
“ Sing round the altar—dance beneath the grove,  
“ Go forth to meet your beckoning deities !  
“ They leave for these their mansions in the skies :  
“ Atargatis ascends her golden bed !  
“ Let sighs be hushed, but prosperous lovers sighs !  
“ She yields to mightier Bel—the Serpent weds the  
Dove ! ”

Pleasure need call but once in Babylon :  
Heart of this breathing world ! whence hourly flow  
All lusts, all vanities—the fire is gone  
Which made thy pantings glorious—dimly glow  
The mightier passions that disturb thee ! Now  
Pride only keeps her everlasting throne,  
By cruel wrath sustained and impious hate ;  
The rest are warmed by luxury alone—  
Lascivious love soon sated, jealousy  
As soon forgot ! The gods whose temple gate  
Thy fickle children throng, are such as they,



Impure, unjust, the blindness of a lie,  
Devotion kneels toward sin, prayer ends in strife or  
play—

Faith must be fed with feasts, and plethoric zeal  
Asks wine for daily sustenance, or dies.

The brazen doors stand wide—within, the vow—  
Without, the tumult: giddy dancers reel,  
Scattering licentious looks from half-closed eyes,  
While transient flushes tinge their breasts of snow,  
Whose sighs are sorceries. All are gathered now  
To mirth and revelry: boys, myrtle-crowned,  
Bear in their hands the censors—dissolute age,  
With fillets coiled about the shameless brow,  
And brodered vestures trailing on the ground,  
Sings to effeminate lyres Belshazzar's rage,  
Soon quenched in victory—himself a god  
Among their idols, has his priests and praise,  
Proud fanes and long processions.

Some that trod

So late in silence through the same broad ways

With doubt upon their studious fronts, or stopt  
To whisper prophecies and number days  
Threatening the land—that, while they spake, looked  
round

With cautious mystery—whose words were dropt  
Like stones in caverns; ere another fell,  
The first was marked how deep, and what it found—  
Hinting at signs in heaven themselves had seen,  
And others visions with sealed eyes in hell;  
All evil auguries, omens, prodigies!  
A serpent burst, whose dead length spreads between  
Belshazzar's throne and threshold—twofold suns,  
Of which the brightest and the first in size  
Wanes, while the least grows largest, then is lost—  
A fount whence blood o'er steaming ashes runs—  
Chaldæa's ensigns torn—subverted towers  
Beheld amidst the clouds—through gulfs a host  
With steeds and chariots passing—toward the north  
A mighty balance midst the stars for hours  
With beam inclined, whose nearest scale hangs light—

Some that had seen the ill-resting dead come forth,  
Kings, princes, prophets, from their graves at night—  
Men honour'd once on earth, heard statues groan  
And cry, "Watch! watch!—Woe! woe! to Babylon!"  
Lo! these be they—the immutable, the bold,  
That sing their triumphs first—that hurry on  
From street to street, that grasp the stranger's hand,  
And swear how well they knew, how long foretold  
An end, like this, of safety to the land,  
To Cyrus shame and danger: these be they  
That build the altar, lead the sacrifice,  
Circle the bowl with flowers—the slow command,  
The cold provoke, to merriment and play,  
Reading their former signs with clearer eyes.

By granite terraces, on either side  
Hedged in, his sounding stream Euphrates rolled,  
Full to the brim—deep, turbulent, and wide,  
Between Bel's temple and those gorgeous domes  
Which Babylonian kings had lined with gold,  
Squandering earth's wealth to ornament their homes.

So spacious were they that the courts might hold  
Fair cities and high bulwarks; in the halls  
Temples might stand, or royal palaces,  
Enclosed entire by marble-pannel'd walls,  
And roofed with fretted ivory. Lower and less  
Is Man's chief labour since; yea, even the abode  
Long after famous in imperial Rome,  
Raised by usurping Cæsars, though it filled  
The Palatine, and on its pavement glowed  
All forms of grace reflected—whither come  
Wanderers from every land—whence Princes build  
Their habitations, digging in the dust  
For sculptured cornices and capitals  
Buried a thousand years—where nightly calls  
Through painted Vaults, whose keys were kept by Lust,  
Gilt Baths, and tessellated Chambers wide  
Half lost beneath the gem-strewn soil—a cry  
Heard daily midst that Palace in its pride,  
But echo'd now by Time with mockery:  
“Seest not how great and beautiful am I?”\*

\* Ουχ οραας οιος καγω καλος τε μεγας τε. Suetonius Domitian.

Greater, and quite as fair, the house in which  
Chaldæa throned her monarchs—farther spread  
Rank after rank its columned porphyry :  
All that the East could find most rare and rich  
Blushed on the floor or glittered overhead ;  
Unseptred Egypt hewed her quarries deep  
To pave its halls with many-colour'd light ;  
India for emeralds searched the torrent's bed,  
For pearls the ocean fathom'd ; cave or steep  
Hid nothing unexplored. And royally  
That Palace bore aloft its gorgeous height,  
Fronting the wave for miles. Nine gates of gold,  
On which was wrought Chaldæa's history ;  
Nimrod and Belus, Gods and warriors old,  
Looked down a hundred steps ere reached the stream—  
A hundred steps or stages—each so wide  
That fountains rested on them, beasts and men  
Of huge proportions, such as sculptors dream,  
But nature never made of bone and blood,  
Or soon destroyed. Beyond the farther side,

Highest 'bove Earth of all Earth groaned with then,  
Or hath sustained since then—Bel's Temple stood—  
Though incomplete the highest—whence impious eyes  
Strove to profane the sovereign rest of God,  
And near at hand discern his mysteries—  
Man's proudest thought and mightiest work ! his road  
To enter Heaven, his broad-stair through the skies !

These opposite : Euphrates flowed between,  
King among rivers—yet the first subdued ;  
For none long afterwards beside had seen  
From bank to bank a highway o'er its flood—  
A path through air—dry ground aloof from land—  
Above his waves, yet separate from his shores,  
A bridge whose many arches seemed to chain  
With links of adamant both stream and strand,  
To grasp his strength, his swiftness to restrain,  
And bind the struggling giant though he roars,  
While dry-shod thousands pass and pass again.

Such common since, though less—a wonder then ;  
Unrivalled yet in height, depth, breadth, or length :

Of stately symmetry and ponderous strength,  
Thronged by expectant myriads ! Never lay  
Stones by the surge more thickly strewn ; nor grass  
Grew closer when the fields were rank in May,  
Than these were crushed and crowded—one quick mass  
Of heated flesh ! In vain both prayers and staves :  
Despatchful looks were vain and threatening speed—  
Chiefs, princes, counsellors, were mixed with slaves :  
Loud sounds the scourge, and fiercely springs the steed.  
The bridge, the steps, the terraces, the waves  
—The waves themselves are hidden—so densely swarms  
That clamorous multitude o'er land and stream—  
The barge floats fast with garlands at its prow,  
The snake-like gally gilds its length with arms :  
Euphrates sees his scaly idols gleam,  
And painted monsters scare the shoals below.

From infinite tongues one sound arises : so  
When morn first breaks in autumn, at his door  
The hind looks out toward heaven, whose winds are calm ;  
Scarce leans the dewy grain o'er-ripe ; his trees

Sustain their fruit sore-burdened as before ;  
He sees the mountain oaks which skreen his farm  
But slightly shake their summits in the breeze,  
Yet not the more improvident of harm,  
Discerns, far off, that melancholy roar  
Continuous, deep—abroad, above, around,  
On earth, in air—sad prophecy of storms—  
Soon perfected—for ere he turns away  
With louder voice the struggling forests sound,  
Blast after blast his half-reaped field deforms ;  
His winter's cheer is lost—his hopes are marred to-day.

Such universal charm was deepening here,  
Till from those golden gates the shrill trump spake,  
And lo ! Belshazzar's ensigns blaze on high !  
Sparkling in glorious mail his Chiefs appear ;  
Steeds taught to seem unteachable, and shake  
Their plume-trapped heads as if for mastery,  
With Median captives fettered in the rear ;  
Then loud as Carmel's pines, or Sidon's waves,  
Or storms on wintry Lebanon—toward the sky



With eyes upturned that mighty concourse raves—  
Belshazzar—Lord ! Belshazzar—Victory !

Before his face two sceptred despots ride,  
Arabia's tributary king, and he  
Who rules through Cappadocia : by his side,  
Each with his kingdom's diadem and robe—  
The Phrygian monarch and the ordained to be—  
—While all men wish what almost all deride,  
And so for ever—o'er this parcel'd globe,  
In every language, learned wisdom hath,  
A moral's close, a maxim's guarantee,  
A child's example when he tutors pride,  
A sage's proverb if he speak of death,  
Or preacher's text to warn how riches flee—  
The Lydian Cræsus blessed, till Death that bliss deride.

Each would have seemed Earth's Sovereign if alone :  
In awful state and princely dignity  
Majestic all ; but o'er their brightness shone  
Supreme indeed the star of Babylon—  
Midst alien kings a king—his people's Deity.

These on their war-steeds mounted, through the press  
Went proudly forth: above them, like a throne,  
His chariot bore the breathing idol high,  
Where millions gazed as if its lips could bless;  
All knees were bent before the mighty one:  
In manhood's prime or youth's blown perfectness  
Ere strength usurps on beauty, such he rode,  
As poets sometimes feign imperious Jove,  
—When Saturn dispossessed had fled his son—  
Through Ida passing, like the sovereign God,  
Though young, nor formed for empire more than love.

A thousand Princes sees he at his feet,  
Ten thousand slaves before him; to his ears  
Uprise the shouts of that wide multitude;  
While midst their gusty pauses, music sweet  
Extols with songs the sceptre that he bears,  
Incense is burnt, and precious stacte strewed:  
Yet, like the god they call him, on his seat  
He takes their servile offerings uninclined,  
A service due from lips scarce worthy this—

Extorted awe, the breath of servitude ;  
His right, their debt, the worship of mankind !  
Milder the next who followed—Nitocris—  
More gracious, not less awful. She had been  
The great correcting spirit, parental soul,  
Whose wisdom strengthened empire, and subdued  
With temperance, pride. Once dreaded as their Queen,  
She governed all uncircumscribed and sole ;  
As wife before, and since as mother, stood  
Beside the throne to make its justice feared,  
Quenching its cruelties : and thus far good,  
That nature, ~~so elate~~—endured control,  
Belshazzar, ~~else~~ obdurate, bent toward her ;  
Even when he hearkened not, he still revered.  
The populace waited till she smiled, then raised  
Their children to behold her ; midst the stir  
Some boasted to have reached her garment's hem,  
Others were sure her eyes looked down toward them :  
It was a claim to praise, thus to have loved and  
praised.

Like Vesta with her towery diadem,  
She passed 'mid Virgin Choirs sublime, and rolled  
Her slow wheels warily. Behind her blazes  
Bel's empty chariot, framed of burnished gold,  
Lustrous, with gems embossed : on adamas light  
Sapphire and amethyst blent, the red sun gazes :  
Rings of alternate rubies, and the stone  
Serene, whose soft hues change to red or white :  
Pearl, beryl, emerald, as the spokes fly round,  
With rainbow glories from its bright wheels glow :  
The naves chalcedony and chrysolite ;  
Of ductile gold the harness chains ; but none  
Dare rein the steeds which draw it o'er the ground :  
Sacred are these, unsullied as the flake  
Which falls on windy Libanus—taught to go,  
To turn, to stop, and governed by a sound—  
Augmenting marvels lest men's doubts awake,  
And vulgar proof if faith seem scant or slow.

Bel's victims next ; but ere approach the last  
The first have reached his temple. About its base,

Coiled round its bulk, the bright procession climbs;  
Eight spiral circles narrowing as they rise.  
The Chorus falters, and the trumpet's blast  
—Toward all Heaven's regions turning—all Earth's  
climes—

Sounds feebly scarce midway. That glorious belt  
Dissolves before it ends: beyond men's eyes,  
Both steed and chariot, where they rest at last,  
As summer insects in the azure melt:  
Nothing is seen so high but smoke of sacrifice.  
——Far different worship where that old man dwelt,  
Long-exiled Sabra, midst the acanthus wild,  
In cypress shades and ilex—silent groves  
Abhorred by those whose deity is lust—  
He, and the orphan maid, his brother's child.  
—With folded arms, and foreheads toward the dust  
Thither the Prince, the Priest, the Elder roves;  
All save their chief and holiest—to his sight  
Visions of changing empires, like the scene  
Of some great theatre, were brought—and years

Assigned, when each would perish from its might !  
A voice too spake Ulais' banks between,  
And Daniel saw the angel. In his ears  
Were dreadful revelations, such as drew  
The astonished prophet's soul in fear away,\*  
Though used to commune on Earth's mysteries  
With spirits from Heaven. The rest, while last night's dew  
Still hung on mossy briar and verdant spray,  
Threading those mazes with distrustful eyes—  
So many paths alike seduced to stray—  
The ancient and the just assembled there :  
And never since, in judgment, council, prayer,  
Met synod more revered ; though Rome may boast  
Her senate lords, mistook for deities,  
And Greece her schools of sages. Unadorned  
The roof, and bare the walls of skill or cost,  
But not unsanctified ; since God loves most  
The contrite spirit, the tear which pride hath scorned,  
And mute humility.

\* Daniel viii. 16.

Subdued at last

So far—if weak, yet humbler in their need,  
The Elders sat ; while Cyrus with his host  
Remote, since dawn their rent pavilions cast  
O'er safer pastures undisturbed. Lo ! one  
Tells what his eyes had witnessed, that the Mede—  
Where forked Euphrates flows with equal streams,  
Wide, rapid, deep, diverging as they run—  
Narrows his armies to the space between,  
Then camps them warily ; nor this suffices,  
But that he builds what like a rampart seems  
From branch to branch, trenching the marshy green  
With pits in front ; discerned, but not begun  
Since day ; thus ever while the earth-mound rises,  
The depth it grows from deepens. Can *he* fear ?  
This great besieger—doth he dread to be  
Himself besieged ? Is this the exile's trust ?  
Whose bulwarks from the city's heights appear  
Like ill-fenced sheepcots on some dangerous lea  
Spoiled of the wolf last night ? Is God unjust !

Or Cyrus not his servant? Faith perplexed  
Lives like a shadow to the things we see,  
And as they perish perishes. Awake,  
Dissembling Israel! mightier signs come next—  
That trench thou scornest shall be a snare to take  
Her feet who tramples on thee; through those pits  
Shall flow deliverance. Safely, carelessly,  
Above mischance, Bel's laughing harlot sits;  
But One she sees not, sees the impiety,  
Rendering her scorn even sevenfold back again,  
And laughs the while at her!

Bel's dissolute priests

Were not unknown in Israel: Carmel drank  
(Loud though they called from morn till eve) in vain  
The blood which gushed so hotly from his priests,  
By voice or fire unanswered! Many and rank  
On mountain height, dim grove, or grassy glade,  
His old pollutions—while the widow's wrong  
Uprose to God. Then matrons undismayed  
Practised their sorceries; oft to wanton song



They danced all day beneath the green tree's shade,  
Inflamed with idols—under rocks and cliffs,  
In the cool vallies, and by every stream.  
Elders were blinded by the oppressor's gifts  
To hold their balance with unequal beam.  
Aslant from truth. Diviners learnt to dream  
Of gold, nor woke they till the cup was near—  
That typical cup, the cup of wine and wrath,  
Which God in judgment made his Prophet bear—  
Following their shadowy confines as he bade,  
To every king and nation through the earth,  
But first to Judah. They that drank grew mad;  
Yet all did drink—both Egypt and the lands  
Of Ekron, Azzah, Ashdod, Ashkelon:  
None might refuse whom idol lusts defiled,  
From Elam's pastures and Arabia's sands  
To Zidon's populous coasts or islands lone—  
The realms of frost and fire—the city and the wild.\*

This they remembered sorrowing. Sabra too,

\* Jeremiah xxv. 15.

Whose zeal till now, when others flag'd, benighted,  
Uncertain in their cheerless passage, grew  
Bright as a spark midst flax, whose hot breath blew  
Extinguished faith, enkindling what it caught,  
Who urged the tired, and led the dimly-sighted,  
Himself seemed ill-composed in spirit; his thought  
Dwelt on the terrors of that destined Maid,  
—A Queen—if fraud may reach to fathom truth,  
Or Hell instruct by fallacies! Alone  
So used were these—she walked beneath the shade  
With others equal-aged—for grief from youth  
Soon passes, and the spirit-healing morn  
Breathed peace. Around the Virgin, where she shone  
Too high for rivalry, their light steps thronging  
Brought early blossoms from the scented thorn  
With buds of Spring's first roses intertwined;  
And gave that genial tribute which the free  
—As nature points to nature's choice belonging—  
Present nor envy. Thus the forest herd  
Feel when surpassing beauty decks their kind,

And instinct forces homage ; taught to flee,  
Or turn, as one may lead them : thus the bird  
Sports with its lustrous tribe o'er mead and hill,  
Or carries winged dominion on the wind,  
Followed by more than love. In grief, her soul  
Seemed like Bethulia's clouded waters—still,  
Inscrutable, unfathomable, full :  
But light, in pleasure, as the azure air,  
Whose hues are those of space and purity ;  
So calm, men look for heaven through such a sky—  
No earthly shade is seen, no threatening image there.

But not from him who sat within his gate  
Departed grief so lightly. Midst the Old,  
Of Bel's detested Sorceress—what befell,  
All he had heard with breathless dread so late,  
His lips at large to shuddering hearers spake—  
How warned, how comforted—both what he told  
Last night ; and much beside he feared to tell,  
Lest terror from the astonished soul might shake  
That strength, secure in ignorance of ill,

Which profits oft, though wisdom's weapons break,  
And vigilance shields no longer.

“ In her face

“ Twice have mine eyes discerned the signs of woe,”

He said; “ nor tardier than her merciless will

“ Death once fore-ran—once followed. Two remain,

“ This frightened maid and I, of all our race;

“ Because the imperious threatener's steps were slow,

“ I thought that they had passed us—but again

“ She ends her circle, and with backward pace

“ Looks full this way.

“ There are of those I see

“ Some that may yet remember what I say,

“ And him who was my brother too, the sire

“ Of this poor child. Life's larger half from me,

“ Hurried by many cares—was gone: the ray

“ Of his far calmer spirit maintained its fire

“ Unquenched, but duly tempered: in degree

“ We seemed to stand as son and father—thus

“ In years we might have been—for young was he.

“ —Ezekiel dwelt by Chebar ; on the side  
“ Of those great waters captive : to enquire  
“ From God, through him, your will made choice of us :  
“ Grace little merited yet not denied !  
“ But Hazer loved to folly in excess ;  
“ And now, so soon a father, quite to sin.  
“ The year before had brought him home a bride—  
“ —Behold the parents of this threatened maid !  
“ Yet was she such as made his frailties less,  
“ Meek, gracious, innocent. His strife within  
“ To quit the babe new-born and her that bore,  
“ Was hard, but well endured—so both obeyed—  
“ With many sighs the anxious man set forth.  
“ A week sufficed to reach that river’s shore  
“ Apart from both its sabbaths : three days there\*  
“ God answered by his Prophet—on the fourth  
“ A milder revelation met our prayer ;  
“ We rose, brake bread, bethought us of our vow,  
“ Then gladly turned our faces from the North.

\* Ezekiel xiv. 1.

“ My brother’s heart was yearning toward his child,  
“ And her so much beloved—a mother now—  
“ Left ill at ease, yet joyful though in pain.  
“ Bel’s blasted summit all our haste beguiled,  
“ Seen day by day before us, dark and high  
“ Encreasing still, though slowly, o’er the plain :  
“ At last we reached it. Night was near her noon  
“ Midway on that fair belt which zones the sky,  
“ Before we trod our starlit grove again ;  
“ But through its well known mazes silently  
“ We hurried as the tired are wont—and one  
“ —Pressed by impatient thoughts of love and pride—  
“ Wondered to see his parting cautions vain,  
“ The bolts all drawn, and outward gate thrown wide !  
“ Hazer went first, then paused awhile—with eye  
“ Turned back he beckoned : stooping down, we cast  
“ The sandals from our feet—while near his side  
“ I heard the panting heart and ill-drawn breath—  
“ Yet neither spake. But when the court was past,  
“ A lamp shone brightly where we rest us now :

“ In sleep—for such it seemed—in sleep or death  
“ We saw reclined the mother with her child.  
“ Some flowers had withered on that tranquil brow  
“ Fair as it ever was—one arm still prest  
“ The babe, whose slumbers parted while it smiled,  
“ And turned its small cheek from her naked breast ;  
“ One loosely lapsing touched the floor beneath.  
“ A woman, with her back toward us, stood by  
“ Holding the light above them. She was not  
“ Of Israel’s daughters—o’er her clouded vest  
“ Were likenesses portray’d from earth and sky ;  
“ Asps, snakes—suns, stars—as native in the place,  
“ She seemed to wait our coming undismayed :  
“ Nor when we entered, did her dreadless face  
“ At first look round, or vary from the spot.  
“ One finger on her hard-closed lip she laid,  
“ Then slowly gazed upon us. ‘ Lo ! they sleep,’  
“ To Hazer whispered she—and next to me  
“ ‘ Do thou take this,’ in louder accents said,  
“ So gave the lamp. I heard the infant weep,

“ The mother’s arm lay stiff and heavily—

“ Perplexed we feared to speak—while both obeyed,

“ This fiend was fled.

“ His babe the sire released,

“ And strove with gentlest tones to soothe its cries :

“ Again composed, the feeble wailings ceased,

“ But she who seemed to rest, her long-lashed eyes

“ No more upraised. Guest, sister, solace, pride !

“ Nor sounds disturbed, nor silence could awake.

“ Then first his thoughts misgave him—at her side

“ He knelt—with tremulous voice her loved name spake—

“ Paused, and where beat the heart, or used to beat,

“ Laid both his lip and palm—its fount was dried !

“ It moved no more. Ah, wretched ! thus to meet !

“ Alas, the mother ! woe ! ah, woe the bride !

“ I knelt with Hazer near her—if I tried

“ To rouse or comfort, grief my speech supprest,

“ And elder far than he—his soul I knew :

“ The wretch gazed on that face till morning’s prime,

“ Yet spake no more but thus :—‘ Thy will be blest,



“ ‘ This was mine idol ! it was I that slew,  
“ ‘ Who loved so much and worshipped.’ From that  
time,  
“ Tired as he seemed, sleep never gave its rest—  
“ He turned away from bread. The grave was new,  
“ —Ye passed beside it in your path to-day,  
“ A bank of moss, where palm and ilex threw  
“ Their darker shadows round Zemira’s clay—  
“ When those who loved us came to weep once more :  
“ His spirit had burst its cords and passed away—  
“ So God was pleased to grant, whose ways are just !—  
“ It was at night, by torch-light, that we bore  
“ My brother’s body forth : beyond the gate  
“ Amongst our mourners tarrying, on the dust  
“ Digged from that double pit, a woman sat,  
“ Veiled, and unmarked, till o’er its brink we rested.  
“ Then, as she rose, her wicked visage thrust  
“ Again toward mine—the same beheld so late—  
“ ‘ Watch well their child,’ whispered that voice detested,  
“ And she was gone.”

The Elder ended here,  
But wisdom tried to ease his heart of fear,  
Lifting its thoughts toward Providence, and turning  
Grief from himself on cares which compassed all :—  
Bel's mastering Hosts, or Zion's broken wall—  
That ancient error, still in part the same—  
The curse at length fulfilled, the Temple burning :  
Till sorrow wakened melody, and wrong  
Spake in alternate strains 'twixt grief and shame  
From many a voice and harp through court and hall—  
And this the imperfect echo of their song.

## HYMN.

Ye hills ! and O ye vallies ! fruitful hills,  
And vallies, in whose shady depths were seen  
By streams then hallowed, founts, and pebbly rills,  
The flocks of Israel graze his pastures green ;  
While mellowing harvests laughed and sang with corn,  
And olives waved, or vineyards glowed between—  
O ! peaceful then at eve ! O ! sweet at morn !

The nations round you point their hands in scorn,  
The Arabian wanders where your pride hath been !

## FIRST SEMICHORUS.

Swift flow thy waters here, and deep—  
Those waters on whose willowed side  
The exile came to sit and weep—  
Bel's walls are strong—his waters wide !  
The mighty spurn—the base deride :  
Ah ! who shall teach to praise or bless !  
In such a Land, midst strife and pride,  
What melody in heaviness !

## SECOND SEMICHORUS.

God's Priests and holier Prophets trod,  
O Zion ! once thy sacred hill,  
His earthly throne—his blessed abode—  
His pleasure then—his pity still !  
In joy or grief—in good or ill—  
If I forget to mourn and love,  
May this right hand forget its skill !  
My harp to sound—my tongue to move !

## HYMN.

Abhorred, afflicted, solitary, thou

The seat which Mercy filled, the shrine she fled  
—Till wisdom left thy king's adulterous brow,

Earth's future trust—its present gaze and dread !

Thy precious things are scattered as a prey,

Thy pleasant courts with all pollutions spread,  
Thy children love thee still—but far away,  
Idols accursed may boast thy spoils to-day !

Will God forget thee yet ? Will wrath pursue the  
dead ?

## FIRST SEMICHORUS.

Chaldæan mistress ! in thine eyes

No tear was seen—no mercy shone,  
When Edom mocked at Judah's cries,  
And bade thee do—as thou hast done !  
She heard his wasted children's moan.

Lord ! in thy wrath she strove to wound,

“ Regard not—spare not—let them groan,”  
And “ down ! down with them to the ground !”

## SECOND SEMICHORUS.

Deep flow thy waters—broad and deep—

Those waters on whose willowed side

The captive exile sat to weep—

Thy walls are strong—thy waters wide !

Thou drunk with glory ! mad with pride !

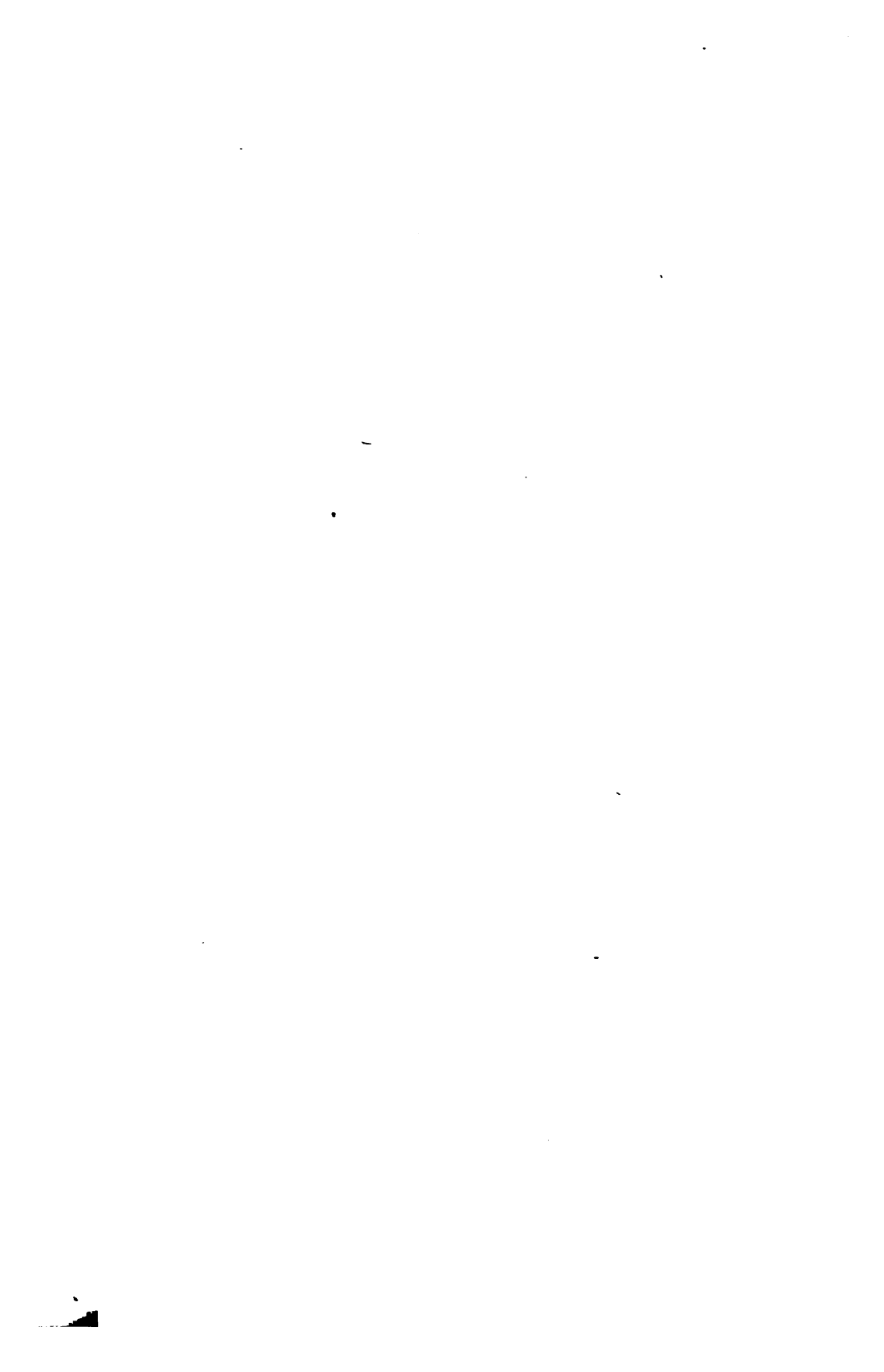
The weak oppress—the poor despise—

Till God shall rouse his strength defied,

And wake thee to thy miseries !

**THE IMPIOUS FEAST.**

**BOOK IV.**



# THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

## BOOK IV.

---

—“PEACE and good will towards men!” Such, gracious  
Lord!

Thy Father’s message when thou didst come down  
With great humility—his Light and Word—  
Incarnate Truth! laying aside the crown,  
Before whose brightness all God’s angels bow,  
And sinless make the sinner’s curse thine own!  
That holy head was shelterless—thy brow,  
Circled with thorns, by cruel hands was smitten!  
Yet uncomplaining Lamb! no voice was heard



But prayer for us—so merciful art thou ;  
Yea, even for those, fulfilling what was written,  
Whose lips blasphemed thy patience, and preferred  
A murderer to their king—" Father, forgive !  
" They know not what they do !"

It is through thee  
If hearts so far estranged have loved or feared,  
And through that Spirit who makes the dead stock live,  
Rendering it fruitful ! Let the rescued see  
How hard and hopeless was their servitude  
When Reason sold itself as slave to sin  
Tired of the truth—Lust stooped its willing knee  
Before congenial altars, and imbued  
Their deities with blood and luxury :  
All knowledge seemed perverted, instinct erred  
Bewildered where the brutes err not—a lie  
Assumed that better voice which cries within,  
Conscience connived, and Nature spake unheard !

Lo ! thus the laughing populace reel along,  
Loud with lascivious jestings o'er the din

Of giddy horn and timbrel. At their front  
Unblamed, unshamed, above the intemperate throng,  
On slow-paced mules, Bel's Priests and Prophets ride—  
Ill-seated cavalcade. Thus sometime wont  
Thessalian revellers, midst mirth and song,  
—Silenus old with Bacchus at his side—  
Copies perchance of these; when vintage ended,  
To crown their foreheads with the faded vine,  
Making their sin their boast, their shame their pride.

So passed triumphant Cathura, attended  
By Assur-baladan, Belsyphirine,  
Rabphalga, Urr, and more, with garments died  
In purple grape-juice, or the lees of wine.  
These were Bel's holiest! Vulgar ministers went  
On either side, each with his vine-wreathed wand;  
Chaldæa's loose-zoned matrons danced before:  
The fairest of her boys and maidens bent  
Beneath their baskets—with unsteady hand  
Maturer youth the half-spilt wine-pots bore;  
And beauty, innocent yet, but seen no more

From this day forth by love's delighted eyes,  
Toward home its still reluctant look addresses,  
Though worshipped by the crowds which swarm below.  
An ignorant part of sin's worst sacrifice !  
Chaplets of costliest pearls confine those tresses ,  
Broidered with gems and gold those vestures flow.  
Each in her chariot riding, like a queen,  
The flower of Babylonian virgins go :  
Incipient deities, whose eyes are seen  
To flash with hopes celestial, as the song  
Extols their glory midst heaven's thrones :—" Where  
    love  
" Immortal in immortals never ceases  
" Through time or change ; and beauty always young,  
" Mightier by far than wisdom, and above  
" All other strength else absolute, increases  
" On food which grows those happy shades among.  
" Atargatis and Bel ! the serpent and the dove !  
" Bel hath his bride to-day in Heaven ; but who  
" Shall meet the glowing God at eve descending

“ Earth’s image of the Goddess, and imbue  
“ Her spirit with divinity, by lending  
“ Corporeal mould, henceforth eternal too,  
“ As habitation to the Queen of souls,  
“ And so surpass earth’s loftiest glory—who ?”

Accursed illusions of that devilish crew  
Whose fraud is hidden in luxury, and rolls  
Its serpent train midst flowers ! The mother brings  
Her fairest daughter to their open door,  
Panting for ever-during crowns in Heaven ;  
Still of Bel’s golden bed the chorus rings—  
Six chariots fraught with beauty pass before ;  
One void remains—his will is bound to seven :  
At last the number and the choice are even !  
A Bride is found ! approach her, and adore !  
Behold love’s Queen !

When greyly looks the morn  
O’er hills and misty plains, ere labour wakes,  
Or smoke from distant cot or sleepy farm  
Stains the chill ether—ere the fragrant thorn

Hath ceased to drip with dew—from forest brakes,  
Tired of their darkness, and its lair still warm,  
The wandering herd advances—roe-buck old ;  
Pied hart with antlers broad, and dappled fawn,  
Midst hollies skirting round the foremost pine  
To graze in lighter pastures, and behold  
Man's world subdued ; affrighted if the kine  
Low from their stalls, or flocks their moistened fleeces  
Shake as they rise, and bleat within the fold :  
Soon reassured the treacherous space increases  
’Twixt them and home—large range for Death behind—  
Whence ambushed slaughter lifts its sudden cry ;  
The hunter's tumult gathers on the wind,  
Shrill horns and clamorous hounds bray furiously !  
Swift as their fears, but scattered and in vain,  
Back to that leafy wilderness, the hind  
Would lead her young : bearing their heads on high,  
Amazed, the panting tribe o'er path and plain,  
Bound, look behind, disperse, collect, and flee,  
Then trace their tangled steps, and trace again.

So from the shadow of that grove, to see  
Belshazzar's triumphs round Bel's Temple winding  
Their homeward splendours as they rose ; a space—  
Yea, but a little space—with breath drawn in,  
Feet often turned for flight, and dubious ears,  
Went Israel's daughters listening to the din  
Far off, through empty streets. In every place  
New sights, fresh terrors, mightier wonders finding :  
And drunken lust thus urged the noisy chase,  
When innocence fled bewildered by its fears,  
Though fleet, soon captive, even to tardier sin.  
Ailona singly struggles midst the crowd,  
Her breast half bare, veil rent away, and face  
Suffused by angry shame, yet dewed by tears ;  
Imploring first, then threatening—suppliant—proud—  
Wild—and subdued by turns. Beneath their gaze,  
Whose slightest glance were injury, she hears  
Bel's choice proclaimed, while Cathura on the ground  
Descending kneels and worships her. “ O ! raise  
“ Those eyes to bless us ! From his towers above,

“ The sovereign God looks laughingly around  
“ Through all Heaven’s regions, for they all are his,  
“ And thine, from him, they will be ! He shall love,  
“ Who led this way the bride himself had found,  
“ —Thou breathing image of Atargatis !—  
“ To silence grief so beautiful in bliss :  
“ The joyful Serpent comes ! O ! joyful be the Dove ! ”

Once more toward home her scattered sisters fly,  
As plovers wing them from the loosened snare,  
Caught, not detained, with plumage discomposed,  
Regardless of their captive fellows’ cry,  
Heard but to quicken terror through the air ;  
Nor which is lost yet know they. One enclosed  
Strives with the toils—her dark and frenzied eye  
Looks round for help ; and if indeed she were  
Human in birth alone, now deified—  
Creature compounded ’twixt the earth and sky,  
From what in each is fairest, fiercer pride  
Could scarce have fired the wronged divinity,  
While fillets round her struggling wrists were tied,

About her knees long wreaths of roses twined—  
A victim bound with garlands, by the side  
Of Cathura and Assur-baladan !

Again the concourse moved, the mirth began,  
Dances obscene before, and hymns behind ;  
Midst impious adoration forced to ride,  
She scared the city's triumphs with her cries,  
Till from Bel's gates sublime the broad steps ran,  
Flight after flight descending, and the last  
Received on earth his worshippers. Three faces  
They compassed of that Temple ; toward the skies  
Aspired the fourth, ere sovereign Wisdom cast  
Confusion midst its builders, or came down  
To separate speech, dispersing families,  
And baffle pride. The rest had portals vast,  
With porphyry porticos, where all earth's races  
Found entrance, all earth's languages, save one,  
Again were heard among them. Deities,  
Captive themselves, were gathered with its tribes  
From every land made subject, and adorned  
The majesty of mightier Bel.



His throng

Dismounting at the utmost step, with bribes  
Of honied promises adjured and fawned,  
So to disguise the force which darkens wrong,  
And leaves an omen midst plebeian fears.  
Unprofitable toil ! Ailona's ears  
Perceive not if the chorus swells or ceases,  
Nor aught of pomp or priest her eyes discern ;  
But steps on high, a Temple, tumult, crowd,  
Like visions while the sick man's thirst increases,  
And weary torments slumber though they burn :  
All else forsakes her, midst the cymbals loud  
Bewildered, but reluctant shame, a dread  
Of unknown sin, despair, remorse, dismay,  
Breath thick with agony, and eyes o'erspread  
As if they sought for succour through a cloud—  
A tongue too swoln to speak, a soul too faint to pray.  
Look up ! behold who calls thee ! Ye that bear  
Yield to a mightier claimant ! From her face  
Bel's dreadful Sorceress draws the veil away,

Your noisy triumph needs must falter there !  
Her name they utter once, the noontide air  
Grows silent when its sound hath passed—a space  
Recoils the nearest on the next behind—  
If gales were stirring men might hear the wind :  
The chariot steeds start back—even Cathura leaves  
His captive kneeling on the steps between :  
Wolf-spoiler of the weak ! that lynx-like glare  
Even at his den confounds him, and bereaves,  
—Despite Seth-arioch's wand, Rab-phalga's prayer—  
The abashed and feebler tyrant of his prey.  
Her bands are burst scarce touch'd—" Now rise, O Queen !  
" My last night's promise finds belief to-day.  
" Ye that pursued, it is your turn to flee—  
" And thou still first where folly needs a guide—  
" Away !"—She spake, then stamping on the ground,  
Smote hard her palms above her head, in pride.  
" The vision that I saw, ye cannot see,  
" Your eyes discern not that her brows are crowned !  
" Kings knelt before her, mightiest kings forsook

“ Their thrones, to bear the cup and bend the knee ;  
“ Whilst every tongue, in every language, spoke,  
“ Look up, ye nations ! kindreds, people, look !  
“ Who worships not the Queen—accursed is he !  
    “ I saw the pleasant tents, on Jordan’s side  
“ Their homeward flocks lay down ; Bethesma’s field  
“ Was filled with bleatings ; softly breathed the gale  
“ While Judah sang his ancient songs again ;  
“ Ten thousand thousands clapped their hands and cried,  
“ His wrath is passed away, His terrors yield !  
“ Farewell those mightier streams, that broader vale—  
“ Behold ! the mountains where our hearts abide !  
“ Hills, vallies, rivers of our fathers—hail !”  
    “ Accursed be they,” the trembling priest replied,  
“ Accursed and soon to perish, who shall take  
“ Awe from the patient sovereignty of Bel,  
“ And at his gates despoil him of his bride.”  
Her scowling visage cleared as thus she spake :  
“ If one be wanting, this at least is well,  
“ Thou wilt not suffer for thy master’s sake,

“ Six brides I leave his servants.”—Deadlier swell  
Rash thoughts within him, dashed by shame ; and pride  
Burns from rebuke more scorchingly : “ Awake !  
“ Lay hold upon the maid—that curse which fell  
“ Shall rest on all who help us not !”—He says,  
And first ascends the step Assyrian Gyre,  
Red from the wine-skin reeking, whose hot cheek  
Is flushed with thoughts of love beneath the rays  
Of cloudless beauty gendered, and the fire  
Blown high by Cathura’s furious breath, to seek  
The praise of all Bel’s worshippers. His hand  
Reaches the virgin’s neck, and round his wrist  
Outstretched, in turn, the Sorceress lays her grasp ;  
Loud yells the dubious concourse ; one long shriek,  
Far louder, pierces Heaven. The red iron’s brand,  
O fool ! were balm to this ; ’twere better twist  
A bracelet from the moulten ore, and clasp  
Thy flesh with liquid silver while it glows !  
When south winds blow and sunny banks are warm,  
As one who plucks in haste the briar-fenced rose,

But feels instead about his naked arm  
An adder's length coiled round, or gripes an asp  
Between mistaking fingers—strives in vain  
To shake the angry reptile from his palm,  
That wreathes the more intense its circles manifold—  
He bellows with affright, and stamps with pain :  
And when, at length, she frees him from her hold,  
To thrice its natural bulk the swoln limb grows,  
Glossy awhile, as if its skin would burst,  
Distained with putrid blackness ; and again,  
Ere wonder suffers that the eye should close  
Which sees its change—far smaller than at first,  
Withers and stiffens round the fleshless bone,  
The bone itself distorting. Thus a scroll,  
Whose parchment lore is useless or unknown,  
Distends its folds, one moment, in the flame,  
And shows a grosser volume than its own,  
Till scorched and conquered o'er the furnace coal  
Its twisted form collapses. Whence he came  
The ghastly cripple turns his leprous cheek,

Blotched with consuming ulcers—eyes half blind—  
And lips extended to the ears. “Now go,  
“For Cathura’s curse bear ours; be just and speak,  
“O thou of giant strength and dreadless mind!  
“Whose words weigh most,” she says. The crowds below  
Flee from a spectacle so foul, and shun  
Him, hideous, following with unstable gait,  
As if in nature’s scorn, despite of fate,  
Some plague-swoln carcass tottered from its grave,  
And bared Death’s loathsome mysteries to the sun.

She tarried not, but thus: “Leave we the brave!  
“Virgin, our path lies higher.” Up Cirta’s coast,  
Escaped its thundering surge and far-pursuing wave,  
The shipwrecked seaman gladly speeds his way,  
Thankful, while all he had, or hoped, is lost,  
Beside the life God gave him—that his feet  
Stand on the solid earth once more, the day  
Shines in his eyes, and, weary though they be,  
His members have their use and feel its heat:  
At first regardless where he is—unthinking

That grief and death usurp both land and sea—  
So toils from step to step the rescued maid,  
Whither she heeds not yet—till near their height,  
On wall and door above, her young eyes shrinking,  
Discern the graven images arrayed :  
Idols part monstrous—natural part ! a sight  
Whence older faces might look round afraid.

“ O mother—dreadful in thine anger—hear ! ”  
She calls, a moment pausing : “ Strong art thou  
“ To ruin or save, who once hast heard my cry !  
“ I may not enter where those shapes appear,  
“ Have pity still ! ” The Enchantress turned her brow,  
Then answered thus : “ Ailona, what have I  
“ With prayers and pity ? On thine head even now,  
“ Anointed Queen ! the oil smells fragrantly  
“ Which made thee mightier.” “ Let thy Servant die,  
“ But mock me not,” she said : “ a captive child,  
“ Alas ! and parentless.” Those pale lips smiled,  
Then spake : “ be strong and follow fearlessly—  
‘ We seek who will not wait.” In doubt, once more

Ailona gazed upon the sculptured wall,  
And on the crowds behind her—should she fly  
Toward those whose treacherous lusts she fled before :  
Or pass through idol symbols to the hall  
Where horned Osiris is a God ? Her eye  
Fills with its tears, while righteous hate prevails  
O'er both the abominations. “ Send me home  
“ Accursed and blasted like the wretch below,  
“ And such as men remember in their tales—  
“ But free from sin ! there tarries till I come,  
“ Who yet will love me though in shame and woe !  
“ Let me flee hence ! ” She spake—with loftier tone  
Replied the impatient Sorceress : “ Take thy prayer !  
“ We will not enter—follow where I go—  
“ Dost wring thine hands and tremble, faithless one ?  
“ —By all men dread in Heaven or Hell—I swear ! ”

Thus ending, toward the left she turns her feet  
Upon that broad step where she staid to hear ;  
Nor rising nor descending, till its point  
Looks diverse, and the Temple's faces meet :



Another length she travels like the last,  
For each gives room, as when with bandaged joint  
The wounded shrinks from him that hurries past,  
Suffering untouched through fear. A voice subdued  
Numerous as insect wings, while sunny morn  
Swarms with delighted life o'er shrub and flower  
In cultured plot or heathy solitude—  
A hushed and equal sound they hear, upborn  
From infinite tongues whose awe breathes health to  
power—

Or like some torrent's distant water roaring:  
Then, where the third front cast its shade, behold!  
Midst tributary kings sublime—in state  
More feared than Bel's itself—Belshazzar sat  
As God enthroned, and all his Hosts adoring!  
    Arrayed with royal pall, and crowned with gold,  
Before his feet the subject monarchs wait;  
Beside, sits Nitocris. In just degrees,  
Descending from the first step to the last,  
And hiding all—his princes on their knees

Worship far off the effulgent Deity.

A living hill, upon whose face is cast

More than the rainbow's brightness, gloriously

Appears that ample slope to shine, with vests

Of all earth's hues or heaven's, when lordly sets

The crimson sun at harvest time, and rests

Pillowed by clouds—such mingled radiance streams

From gold-enwoven robes and jewelled coronets.

Nor space enough that mighty area seems

Between the steps and river, to contain

His congregated armies—helms and spears—

Thick though they stand and level, as the ears

Of Egypt's barley when her prosperous fields

Brought food by handfuls, and the unmeasured grain

Was stored, till Famine's lean and blasted years,

Foreshown in dreams, consumed it. Lustrous shields,

And mail, whose burnished plates of brass or gold,

Repel the arrowy sunbeams opposite ;

O'er-serried ranks of horse and foot, unrolled

Chaldæa's ensigns glitter in the light :

Crescents and stars—the signs which men adore  
As Gods in heaven—and beings of earth and water—  
Are imaged here with shapes supposed or true.

Irresolute stops the maid to breathe, once more,  
But thus her guide: “Yet dost thou doubt me, daughter?  
“One of their thrones is thine—earth has but two!  
“Dost linger still?” Then up those steps, and through  
Their prostrate crowds, the shuddering virgin bore,  
Light as a kid unweaned in hands like hers,  
Till at the thrones she placed her, in the view  
Of those who sat, where Monarchs bowed before,  
Herself erect. The startled God uprose;  
And with him, from their knees, his worshippers;  
Myriads of quivers rattled, unstrung bows  
Were bent, and lances shaken; but her mien  
Seemed peaceful, and the uplifted hand outspread,  
Motioned as theirs that speak, while thus she said:  
“Dost gaze like one who knows me not, O Queen!  
“Remember Nineveh.” The Queen replied:  
“Woman, I do remember thee, with dread,

“ But not unthankfully.” “ A captive maid,”  
Exulting spake the Prophetess again :  
“ A captive in the wilderness—that cried  
“ To taste of water, near the fountain’s side,  
“ And none would give ! I turned me from the slain,  
“ From dreams I rose, and o’er her naked head  
“ These eyes discerned the garland of a bride—  
“ They saw the crown of power, the canopy of pride !  
“ A leafless branch cast loosely on the sand,  
“ A dying branch was found—a broken spray—  
“ I raised the sapless fragment in mine hand,  
“ To fertile streams I bore the lost away :  
“ Its roots are deep as Hell—the light of day  
“ Rejoices midst its blossoms. Sea and land,  
“ Morn, noon, and eve, are covered by its shade :  
“ Belshazzar, from thy regal seat look down !  
“ A fairer plant beside its parent grows  
“ Ere yet the fruit fall off, or verdure fade—  
“ Accursed is he that spurns ! seek thou to cherish !  
“ Chaldæa sends the Virgin for her Crown ;

“ Thy Queen stands near thee with anointed brows,  
“ I heard the words—woe ! to Chaldæa, woe !  
“ If she shall weep—woe to the tongue of pride !  
“ Woe to the golden city ! ere she perish,  
“ The streams shall fail—Bel’s roofs with fire shall glow—  
“ Woe to the loftiest first ! the Bridegroom ere the  
Bride !”

She said, and tarried not reply, but straight  
Passed by their thrones, none hindering, to the gate  
Of moulten brass behind, whose valves stood wide,  
Lamps never quenched and altar-fires revealing ;  
But where the Sorceress placed her, paused the Maid  
Aghast, with loosened tresses, eyes unveiled :  
Panting from flight and strife—and yet afraid—  
With beauty’s tears to love, through grief, appealing—  
And bosom still unconscious though betrayed.  
As if some being of happier worlds bewailed  
Its shame in earthly bondage—from his place  
The astonished king beheld that trembler kneeling—  
For soon she knelt—and o’er her innocent face,

Before so pale, celestial blushes stealing,  
A rosier hue and healthier lustre shed.  
Meanwhile the Sovereign Mother to the ground  
Descending whence she sat—above her head  
A web like silver, from her own unbound,  
A filmy veil of precious texture spread.  
Belshazzar waves his hand, the trumpets sound  
Dispels, like mists, that mighty concourse—still  
As leaves on summer groves at noon, or reeds  
On lake or fen, till gales begin to blow,  
When both awake—rank marsh and woody hill,  
Touched by the breeze. The pageant as before  
Moves on august and slow with homeward steeds:  
But wearied wisdom sickens midst the show,  
And age endures its heat and cries no more;  
The popular breath of slaves her great heart scorning,  
Less clamorous ways are best to Nitocris.  
She shuns the encumbered bridge oblique, and leads  
Where barges built of cedar touch the shore,  
Each with its ivory beak and silken awning.

In foam behind the whitened waters hiss,  
With practised cadence dips and skims the oar:  
Lost, rescued, frightened—Captive, Queen, and Bride!  
Well may she look beyond attaining this;  
As lightly down that river's ample tide  
By ancient palaces she floats, and towers  
Whose heads are in mid air, 'twixt arches wide,  
Gilt domes, and groves of stateliest growth below,  
Her reflux spirit mounts again to bliss.  
The voice of pleasure issues from their bowers—  
Sweet music, sweeter when its haunts are hid—  
The careless laugh—the light and sportive scream:  
And still she sees the granite portico,  
Fresh-sculptured obelisk, or pyramid  
With trembling shade inverted in the stream.  
Like streaks of fire the sister gallies glow,  
Gilt to their keels, and freighted deep with arms;  
Sometimes abreast the rival banner flies,  
Nor yet too far for interchange of smiles,  
While playful beauty half unveils her charms

To traffic with divided love in sighs ;  
Till reverence checks the speed which hope beguiles,  
Strength yields to awe, and emulous haste grows wise.

The thoughtful Queen sits silently ; her eyes  
Rest on the Maid.—Now sound your clarions ! blow  
Your deep-toned horns ! the sovereign Mistress comes !  
With costlier art her marble portals rise,  
To steps of porphyry turn the bounding prow—  
Behind, o'er all—o'er pinnacles and domes  
Groves bloom in air, and gardens in the skies.

She that had tarried midst the noiseless hall  
From day to day, and watched the sunbeam creep  
With lengthening arc, in autumn, on its wall—  
Whose sum of time was shared 'twixt toil and sleep,  
Truth's holiest teachings and the rest of God—  
Following through chambers where her sandals trode  
On variegated pavements, and the crowd,  
Though Slaves within, were Princes at the gate,  
Saw ill at ease that while the Queen passed by  
Was every lip compressed and forehead bowed ;



Gracious, indeed, yet awful in her state,  
A Mother, but with dread and royalty.

Within the shadow of that gorgeous pile  
Is compassed all which earth can boast elsewhere  
As broad to use as daylight. Feasts beguile  
The else vacant hours ; melodious choirs are nigh  
When Love shall call them ; fountains cool the air ;  
In crystal mirrors beauty learns to smile ;  
The couch is softly strewn for luxury ;  
And baths of jasper nerve the limbs of Care.  
To such her guides conduct her—pleased and kind,  
Three garrulous maids, a laughing sisterhood,  
Whose charge she is, all eager to begin  
With offices of love their task assigned—  
Chaplets are wreathed, robes chosen, odours strewed :  
They teach her how to bar the door within,  
Then bow their heads and leave her.

Such a change—

Sudden and dubious still if evil or good,  
But in the extreme of one—a portent strange

Believed, distrusted, disallowed, yet feared,  
Hath touched her soul ; and now in solitude,  
Whence eyes of late so kind have disappeared,  
Voices so bland have parted—now it is  
That wonder finds a larger world begin ;  
One stunning thought misrules a multitude ;  
The spirit toils to sound its own abyss—  
Error is twined with truth, and innocence with sin.

Lonely she stands at last ; of figured gold  
The cieling glows above her ; on the ground,  
Inlaid with lucid shades and colours manifold,  
Birds seem to perch or flit midst fruits and flowers :  
In chariots riding kinglike warriors crowned  
Above their steeds mosaic sceptres hold :  
A vase of sculptured agate largely pours  
From level lip its sparkling waters round ;  
More spacious still the bason where they fall,  
From one fair stone scooped out. That Huntress chaste,  
Whose wrath transformed Actæon, here had found  
Room for her heated Nymphs, where none molest,

To sport at pleasure in its depth, if all  
Had bathed beside their Mistress. From her waist  
Its zone of silk the pensive Maid unbound,  
And drew the slender sandals from her feet ;  
O'er roof and floor, and round the sculptured hall,  
Her eyes still wandered, while the heaving breast,  
And cheeks distained by conscious nature's heat,  
High thoughts of power and love's first dream confess—

Dreams disallowed, and thoughts she feared to think—  
Thrilling with cold ere felt, she made her seat  
A moment on the ceaseless fountain's brink,  
Touched the pure wave within, and cast aside the  
vest.

Meantime the chamber of that awful Queen—  
Her cool retiring-place, where pomp might rest  
Its chafed and jaded sovereignty unseen—  
Is strewn with fresher roses ; fruits are piled  
In crystal urns—the rarest and the best,  
That men spend lives in seeking midst the wild,

Or art, with equal labour, plucks at home.  
Far climes meet here, from Ganges to the fords  
Where nations cross on foot the infant Nile:  
Damascus sends her tribute; some lone Isle,  
Which may possess a name in times to come,  
Unnumbered now, its single wealth affords:  
Whatever nature from her children hoards,  
Profuse in vain elsewhere, or freely throws  
To those who ask with patience—moist and dry,  
Hard-rin'd, or candied in its sweetness—all  
That gathered when the sun hath touched it, glows  
With purple clusters from its branch on high;  
Or on the ground, before his hot beams fall,  
Is sought midst early dews beside its root.  
In golden vessels spice and wine stand by—  
A fragrant altar, heaped with flowers and fruit  
Her table seems, on some great festival;  
Herself enthroned its present deity,  
Who waits the approaching votaress.

Lo! she comes,

Bearing the fountain's freshness on her cheek,  
And robed as those are feigned whose sacred homes  
Are caverns in the ocean—like its green  
When least disturbed, or hues which sometimes streak  
The sunset skies with tenderest light serene,  
'Twixt gold and azure mingling. Flowerets sweet  
The wreath whose twisted tendrils crown her tresses;  
Pearls edge and bind the sandals on her feet;  
More white than pearls that panting bosom presses  
The belt which ill restrains and half conceals.

Happy are they that follow where she kneels;  
In beauty's triumphs skill may claim a share—  
The sovereign Mistress raises her, and feels  
That nature, when she framed a being so fair,  
Conferred the right to empire. Of the wine  
She tastes herself, and offers to her guest;  
Spreads fruit before her—soothes with gentle speech—  
Commends Arabia's spice and Syria's vine,  
Then bids her matrons leave them. "Eat and rest,"  
She says; "take courage from the cup to teach

“ Whence came ye both—that Prophetess who blest,  
“ And thou with her.” The Virgin’s lips obey—  
Faultering at first, nor yet assured are they—  
But pleasure lights her eyes—hope glows within her  
breast.



**THE IMPIOUS FEAST.**

**BOOK V.**





# THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

## BOOK V.

---

AILONA'S words were ended, when the Queen,  
After short pause replied: " Thus much is known  
" Of Judah and his kindred tribes—if time,  
" Whose weight hath crushed so many thoughts between,  
" Corrupt not knowledge more remote—alone,  
" Unsocial midst earth's sovereignties—sublime,  
" Not loved, they stood in solitary pride  
" Severe, with envied greatness. Some declare  
" That one impartial Father ruled at first  
" The worlds he made; till weaker gods defied

“ Him, though their king—poisoning this nether air  
“ Once pure, with malice ; till the slakeless thirst  
“ Of power or wisdom tempted to their side  
“ Apostate man ungrateful—who, in turn,  
“ Forsaking was forsaken. Then the Sun  
“ Became a prey usurped by envious Bel,  
“ The Moon by Benoth ; while the Lights which burn  
“ With nearer brightness than their fellows, run  
“ Each as its Angel guides it. Earth and Hell,  
“ The realms of Life and Death, are free to all,  
“ For all are worshipped in the fanes of men,  
“ O’er whom they watch with jealous sovereignty,  
“ Answering by oracles. To these we call,  
“ Ill-succoured, if we need their help, and when  
“ We grieve or fear : but He whose rest on high  
“ Was threatened by his servants, leaves mankind  
“ Midst snares and terrors to their chosen guides  
“ That rain upon our heads dissension, hate,  
“ Envy of others’ good, disease in heart and mind,  
“ Remorse, and many-featured Death. He hides

“ His face from both, serene in cloudy state,  
“ Creating happier natures. Stars which seem  
“ Less bright than ours to us, are suns as large  
“ As that which lights this swarming earth, and beam  
“ On soils with warmth as fruitful. Men descry  
“ Them, or his glorious ministers, whose charge  
“ They are, like dust upon the tranquil skies,  
“ Spotting with fire night's blue infinity.  
“ Our world hath lost its parent God—but one  
“ Stood firm, they say, of all its families :  
“ This he regarded with paternal eyes,  
“ Making just laws. Bel twice hath stopped the sun,  
“ And once turned back before him—once his hand  
“ Was cast beneath the chariot flames outspread,  
“ And interposed its shadow o'er the land  
“ From Neph to Pathros, ere his people fled,  
“ At mid-day darkening Egypt. Till at last  
“ His own too changed him for less scrupulous lords  
“ And service suited to their lusts. Then fell  
“ Dominion, as a dream their glory past,

“ Wisdom decayed, before Chaldæan swords  
“ They stooped, and left the vacant world to Bel,  
“ Whose prey they are. Nor yet is light withdrawn  
“ From all, nor ever doth his spirit flee  
“ The heart it once hath sanctified : a ray  
“ Unquenched endures—his prophets still can warm  
“ When fear o’ershadows mightiest kings. We see  
“ One such at least, whom prosperous hours may scorn,  
“ But shame and pride cannot forget.

“ To-day

“ I was, as I have been of old—alone  
“ In wealth, supreme in majesty, in power  
“ Above all other women : never yet  
“ Has earth beheld but one upon its throne  
“ So high, nor one so happy. Now mine hour  
“ Declines toward eve and darkness—ere it set  
“ Make thou a covenant with me : let us live  
“ As child and mother should—thy leaf shall thrive,  
“ While mine dries up and withers. Dost thou fear ?  
“ We use no sorceries—rise, beloved and blest !  
“ Content, and in good time, I yield my place

- “ To thee soon mightier—age inclines to rest ;  
“ And she hath called me hence who brought me here.  
“ What needs the drop which sparkles on thy face  
“ To soothe or charm me ? less than such a tear  
“ May perfect easily, what I with pain  
“ Have wrought so far—leavening Belshazzar’s pride,  
“ And henceforth softening cruelty. His heart  
“ Has thoughts which turn toward pity ; but in vain,  
“ While Haza beckons mischief at his side,  
“ Beari sows her jealousies apart,  
“ And many stir the furnace-flames again  
“ Whose heat hath scorched so many. Both queen and  
    bride,  
“ Too high for these to reach thy state—repress  
“ Contentious vanity. Belshazzar hates  
“ The thorns which fret his patience, when he wakes  
“ From dreams of wrath to grief and soberness,  
“ Yet still endures. Stand thou by mercy’s gates,  
“ And fill, with better heed, the place which age forsakes,  
“ For blessed are they whose lot it is to bless !

“ ‘ Chaldæa sends the virgin for her crown’—

“ Dost only half believe this prophetess?

“ For me—had thunders witnessed to her voice,

“ Repeating word by word, I yet should trust

“ No more than I do now. The seed was sown,

“ We know not whence—we know not if her choice

“ Preferred the plant, or mightier fate have thrust

“ A forced adoption on reluctant will ;

“ But judge thou whether that, whate’er it be,

“ Which makes all hateful opposites accord,

“ All nature’s covering in one web—and still

“ Entwining prescience with necessity,

“ Most strongly when most strained—have not some cord

“ Stretched from this Sorceress to ourselves, and tied

“ ’Twixt her and us. Now mark.

“ Above the ford

“ Of Chaboras dwelt I, at an age like thine,

“ Not far from stormy Orchoe. Such is pride—

“ Our valley seemed a kingdom, and our home

“ A royal habitation ; yet the line

“ Required to mete Bel’s Temple whence we come,  
“ Would compass, with superfluous length beside,  
“ Fane, palace, fortress, city. Poor were we,  
“ —Too weak, it seemed, for jealousies—so just  
“ That none could hate us—and our eyes might see  
“ Their little empire to its utmost bound,  
“ Nor need deputed watchfulness. But lust  
“ Looks farther than to find offence. At night  
“ I slept as they are used who know not ill :  
“ So ponderous were my slumbers, that the sound  
“ Of feet which trampled overhead, and shook  
“ The couch beneath me, waked me not. A light  
“ Fell on mine eyelids, undiscerning still  
“ The truth from dreams. At length one near me spoke,  
“ A heavier footstep faltered on the sill—  
“ It was my father’s voice—‘ We wake too late !  
“ ‘ I cannot help thee now—nor force nor flight  
“ ‘ Avails—the Spoiler rages in the gate—  
“ ‘ Where shouldst thou flee, my child ?’ His bloody look  
“ I saw, and when he reeled, I heard his groan—



“ But through the falling rafters, from his side,  
“ They forced who never pitied. Court and street  
“ Were filled with fire, where dreadful faces shone  
“ In that broad light past human. Avarice tried  
“ To gather rapine midst the smoke and heat  
“ Itself had raised, and thirst of blood pursued  
“ Through flames, from roof to roof, its fugitives.  
“ With flakes on high our ancient temples burn.  
“ At length the robber seeks his solitude—  
“ He hastes the first away who fairest thrives.  
“ Beyond the gate I heard my mother’s cries—  
“ Aloud she called that never might return.  
“ Who else was spared I knew not—all night long  
“ We travelled, and from homes once blessed behind  
“ We saw the red sparks mingling with the skies.  
“ Then names were whispered round us, and the slain  
“ Were called by those who wept! Amidst the throng  
“ Some met past hope—short happiness! to find  
“ The arms which should embrace them fast, and hear  
“ Impatient sufferance struggle with its chain.

-

“ On camels, late their own, a part were bound—  
“ Gray-headed captives seated midst the spoils  
“ Themselves had furnished. Cruel that night of fear !  
“ More miserable still the dawn which found  
“ No succour while it lit our shame, and showed  
“ Whose prey we were !

“ The scattered remnant toils  
“ Through vales and mountains, till we see once more  
“ —Marked by its smoke—our desolate abode :  
“ River and misty plain behind us steaming—  
“ A desert spreads its pale expanse before :  
“ Immeasurable wastes—nor, whence we stand,  
“ Remote appear their earlier confines gleaming—  
“ But height deludes the unpractised eye, and still  
“ ’Twixt bare or tufted crags on either hand,  
“ The rough descent slopes tortuously along—  
“ In shade at first, but neither fount nor rill  
“ We find, nor verdant bank for rest, but cliffs  
“ Where never rings the amorous shepherd’s song,  
“ Herds never low, unless by rapine driven

- “ Precipitous as now, the ox uplifts,  
“ His mouth and fills the vallies with complaint.  
“ Narrow the pass, as if through mountains riven,  
“ By which we poured our noisy multitude—  
“ Beasts burdened, horsemen armed, and captives faint,  
“ Urged on with clamorous haste though none pursued.  
“ The sun was high before we reached that plain,  
“ And smote upon our heads direct—all day  
“ Toiling through dusty wastes, we rested not.  
“ Some had but part to travel with us—pain  
“ Or misery made them mad—beneath the ray  
“ On those bright sands insufferably hot,  
“ ’Twixt noon and eve, they strewed the sultry track  
“ Speechless, with froth-encumbered lips, at first ;  
“ Then ceased in death. I raised mine eyes in vain—  
“ No respite saw they : from the camel’s back  
“ On which I sat, made desperate now by thirst,  
“ I asked to stop and perish. Near me rode  
“ —Triumphant in his spoils and victories,  
“ Proud of the steed which bore him, loud with mirth,

“ Tho’ youthful, cruel—one whose ill thoughts showed  
“ Their ever-changing baseness from his eyes—  
“ The Son of our Destroyer. ‘ Maid, the earth  
“ ‘ Here is accursed,’ he said, ‘ but this it gives—  
“ ‘ To cool thy lips let this awhile suffice—  
“ ‘ The sun, before he sets, shall see thee drink  
“ ‘ Where water will be found for all—our wives,  
“ ‘ And then ourselves.’ I feel my spirit shrink  
“ To own that of the fruit he reached I ate,  
“ So strong was misery over pride—but still  
“ The desert wilderness around us spread ;  
“ The beast reeled wearily on which I sat ;  
“ Bel’s rayless disk descended broad and red,  
“ When lo ! at length a little isle-like hill  
“ Scarce fringed the else smooth horizon with its trees—  
“ Some few low rocks and verdant palms. The cry,  
“ Or scented stream, awakened what remained  
“ Of strength once more, and braced the camel’s knees  
“ To toil with quickened step thus far. We found  
“ A fount of living water there—we drained,

“ Impatient that they flowed so scantily,  
“ Both source and stream : while near us, on the ground,  
“ Shadowed by rocks, with mantle o’er her face,  
“ Lay one who seemed to sleep—’twas heavily,  
“ For all our cries disturbed her not. Unbound,  
“ A dromedary rested at the place,  
“ Of that swift kind which men prefer to gold,  
“ And none may buy.

“ The youthful Spoiler said :

“ ‘ These too Adrammalech hath sent—behold,  
“ ‘ We both have gained since yesterday a Bride !  
“ ‘ The fairest portion, Father, to the old—  
“ ‘ Mine is the beast alone, take thou the maid !’  
“ Thus ended sportive, and in haste drew near,  
“ Toward her who yet lay slumbering.—‘ Up !’ he cried ;  
“ ‘ Who sleeps so deeply needs to sleep the less—  
“ ‘ Woman, awake ! we too must rest us here :  
“ ‘ It is thy turn to watch the wilderness.’  
“ Then snatched the covering of her face aside  
“ Like one indeed surprised, yet not with fear,

“ From earth upsprung this scowling Prophetess—

“ Of stature higher than women by the head ;

“ Her countenance then had beauty—such in kind

“ As that, which gilding shapes we needs must dread,

“ Augments abhorrence—though their burnished scales

“ Are brighter than the sardine stone, and wind

“ With hues of fire before the astonished eye

“ In reptile flexures swift and gracefully.

“ At once applause is hushed, and laughter fails—

“ The captive that but now had prayed to die ;

“ And he, the tyrant, that had chained him, shake—

“ Both shrink alike—though neither yet knows why—

“ All gaze, and reel confounded from her side.

“ She smiled upon the youth, while thus she spake :

“ ‘ What else ? who called me ?—Yea the waste is wide—

“ ‘ Thy slave will watch—behold me here awake !’

“ Scorn yet maintained its even gait with pride,

“ And in the threatenings of that dreadful face

“ Derision deigned to mock what hate defied.

“ The panther thus can fondle with her prey—

- “ Turn round as if for flight—resume the chase—  
“ Make terror sport—protract despair with play—  
“ Then let rage loose. ‘Go rest,’ she added, ‘now :  
“ ‘Lie down to longer slumbers in my place.’  
“ What followed next, I heard not—on his brow  
“ She breathed, and swifter than the sulphurous East,  
“ From whose hot wings in hazy dimness blow  
“ The swarms suffused, which feed and live on death—  
“ O’er summer flower a blast, a blight o’er man and beast—  
“ Smote deep the scalding vapour of her breath.  
“ I saw that scorner stoop before her spell,  
“ Even toward his father’s feet : he would have prayed  
“ For help or mercy, but the curse too well  
“ Its charge fulfilled—too quick her lips obeyed—  
“ Convulsed, deformed, distorted, swoln, decayed,  
“ A corpse abhorred—he blackened while he fell.  
“ Some reined the unwilling steeds to fly—some fled—  
“ Part looked bewildered round them for the spear :  
“ The boldest knew not what he did or said—  
“ Whether to smite, to shun, to threat, or fear.

“ While all recoiled beside, the heirless Sire  
“ Approached, but yet unsteadily—so near  
“ Did vengeance poise its trembling scale with dread ;  
“ And terror halve the dubious thoughts of ire :  
“ One hand was raised to strike—one held outspread  
“ Was lowered in supplication—‘ Woman, hear !  
“ ‘ We too can slay—though not, as thou, with fire ;  
“ ‘ Have pity on him yet—O ! spare to harm the dead !’  
“ She stooped, and in the hollow palm uptook  
“ Of water from that fountain—where it laves  
“ The desert flowers, soon spent. More dreadful now,  
“ In louder wrath her voice—unmixed the look  
“ Of hate—her eye-balls and her cruel brow  
“ Were red with fiercer threatenings. ‘ Peace, ye slaves !  
“ ‘ I have been merciful ! who lifts his eye,  
“ ‘ Fixed by my curse for ever where ye tread,  
“ ‘ Shall think them happy that may hide in graves,  
“ ‘ Or envy rest like his, on such a bed ;  
“ ‘ And pray for grace which thus permits to die !’  
“ Their hands let fall their weapons ; toward the dust



- “ Their faces bowed they—on the ground they rolled  
“ As if its sands might shelter them : they cried  
“ In turns, for peace and pity, to her. ‘ Just  
“ ‘ Art thou—blood’s winged inquisitor ! behold !  
“ ‘ We meet the faces of their gods again !  
“ ‘ Let this suffice—he stooped, he fell, he died ;  
“ ‘ Before thy feet he perished ! take our gold—  
“ ‘ Accept, O Queen, an offering for the slain !’  
“ She cast the water from her hand, and came  
“ Straight where I stood confounded ; yet till then  
“ Her eyes had not been turned that way—by name,  
“ Beckoning, she summoned me as one known long :  
“ Less fearful woke I midst the cries of men  
“ Last night, to gaze at once upon the dead,  
“ Dragged from my father’s house—than while her tongue  
“ Pronounced it, and that outstretched palm undried  
“ Lay chill upon my neck, as thus she said :  
“ ‘ His part I take for mine—keep what ye will beside.’  
“ Ill things, when near to ill, may seem the best ;  
“ Deserts become our refuge ; they whose sword

“ Had made us destitute, like friends appeared,  
“ All other human shapes were less abhorr’d :  
“ But those to whom I clung drew back the vest,  
“ And struggled to escape me as defiled ;  
“ Dread mastered love—the eyes which pitied feared .  
“ And turned away—less potent than her word,  
“ Nature renounced her rights, and from the breast  
“ On which life’s dream began, a mother loosed her child.  
“ If kings prepare for war by sacrifice  
“ And Moloch feasts ; at first, with wondering ears  
“ The infant listens to their cymbals loud,  
“ Suspense in studious awe and meek surprise :  
“ While every face is turned toward where he stands,  
“ His own is gazing on his nurse’s tears—  
“ High blaze the midnight fires, the dancing crowd  
“ O’er reddened garlands shake their gilded wands—  
“ But thoughts perplexed by dubious terrors rise,  
“ For still no yearling bleats, no kid appears ;  
“ At length the priest draws near with lifted hands,  
“ Again more loudly peal those horns and drums,

“ The altar’s flames are raging toward the skies—

“ With hands outstretched the cruel claimant comes !

“ Shrill heard through all ascend the struggler’s cries—

“ His little heart is bursting ere he dies.

“ ‘ Fool! wouldst thou live a slave with these? Wouldst  
pine

“ ‘ Midst caverns of the wilderness, and tread

“ ‘ Its sands, in thirst, for ever? Shall the dust

“ ‘ Suffice for drink? Will thorns produce thee wine?

“ ‘ Canst thou devour the desert-stones for bread?

“ ‘ —Be still, and hear me speak—are these thy trust?

“ ‘ Is it so hard to quit the hands which shed

“ ‘ Thy father’s and thy brother’s blood—for mine?

“ ‘ What if I smote the Spoiler in his lust?

“ ‘ Doth this afflict thee? Shall the blessed repine?

“ ‘ Sit down by me.’ So spake she, while her strength

“ O’ermastering drew me helpless to the shade,

“ Ill-comforted but soon subdued. In woe

“ I knelt beside her, speechless; till at length

“ To change seemed better, since despair could grow

- “ No worse by changing, and the proud obeyed  
“ Are sometimes merciful. ‘ Thou shalt be great !  
“ ‘ Thou shalt put out the eyes which watch thee now,  
“ ‘ The desert shall not hide them from thee—wait !  
“ ‘ It is not long to tarry.’ Thus she cried,  
“ And from her scrip a little cruize unbound,  
“ Water and fruit she gave me ; bread I ate,  
“ Strong wine I tasted trembling at her side :  
“ The beast alone lay near us on the ground—  
“ She made me sit above its loins, and sat  
“ Herself before me, ere it rose. In vain  
“ My mother calls and follows now—too late,  
“ Though well perchance for both, her fears subside :  
“ Upborn, with strength refreshed, and easier gait,  
“ In haste begins my westward course again.  
“ Short seemed the space ’twixt sunset and the night :  
“ The moon behind us in its fulness shone :  
“ Of purest sand reposed that herbless plain  
“ Under the purple firmament. Our sight  
“ Reached far, yet saw no bounds—but rock or stone

“ Half-buried in the drifting soil, and spread  
“ With dreary intervals, appeared alone  
“ On earth—heaven’s ever-wandering isles above.  
“ Nor sounds were there—the dromedary’s tread  
“ Passed noiseless marked in dust. But she who drove,  
“ Watched not the yellow waste, or ether blue,  
“ Nor paused, nor hesitated; she went on  
“ Silent and swift, till more and mightier grew  
“ The shivered cliffs around us, one by one,  
“ High ’bove the horizon, in a thousand forms  
“ On either hand distinct—such shapes as fear  
“ Might worship for relenting Gods, whose storms  
“ Forebore awhile to vex the wilderness:  
“ At first remote, but every hour more near,  
“ With denser ranks, to right and left, they press;  
“ Narrowing the dismal vale through which we ride:  
“ Thence cries the uneasy stork and wandering owl,  
“ The leopard crosses to their shadier side;  
“ Or wolf turns back with half-suspended growl;  
“ Above our heads deep croaks the ill-resting raven;

- “ Behind, as if too late, the hyena raves.  
“ And signs we see that men had once lived there,  
“ Though shown in works of death—continuous graves—  
“ Subverted urns—huge stones and deeply graven :  
“ The sculptured dragon guards its sepulchre :  
“ A sphynx, broad-faced, looks calmly toward the moon.  
“ Like regal monuments they seem, and some  
“ Imperishable still, in night’s clear noon  
“ With trophied arms and granite warriors frown,  
“ Bordering the road we travel ; till we come  
“ Straight to some mighty city, whose high towers  
“ Are broken, and the embattled wall cast down :  
“ Her gates stand wide—no living shapes appear—  
“ None waits to watch or question : brightly showers  
“ That glorious radiance o’er deserted streets,  
“ To all but us unprofitably clear.  
“ Through grassy court and ponderous portico  
“ We ride—unchecked the dromedary beats  
“ His hoof with quick and regulated sound.  
“ At length I spake in tones subdued and low,

“ As fearful who should hear me: ‘ Tell me this—

“ ‘ Since ignorance such as mine such grace has found,

“ ‘ Thou yet wilt spare me if I ask amiss—

“ ‘ What endless city spreads where’er we go?’

“ She stopped, descended, helped me to the ground,

“ And answered, not indeed as one who feared,

“ Like me, to rouse the slumberers from repose ;

“ But so that Echo, loud at first and nigh,

“ Then far remote, repeating what I heard

“ Each time distinct, though lessening toward their  
close—

“ Taught in that mournful name its history—

“ Thrice sounded ‘ *Nineveh*.’

“ Nor space for more

“ She gave, but left the panting beast unbound,

“ Then straight led on. I followed close, and found

“ All desolate: the wastes we passed before

“ Had less of sorrow than man’s late resort,

“ Thus void, where what his busy hands had wrought,

“ His heart had feared or panted for, and all

“ His eyes were once intent on ; where he came  
“ To buy, to sell, for business, worship, sport—  
“ The Mart, the Temple, Palace, Garden, Hall—  
“ Where all things else remained, and most the same,  
“ But he their Lord ! midst works of human pride,  
“ No human soul.

“ In haste the Enchantress treads  
“ What late were ornaments : on either side  
“ Streaked by the golden moonlight where they cross,  
“ Are other streets extending—courts as wide,  
“ As spacious Palaces—and o’er our heads  
“ Distorted shapes of men or beasts emboss  
“ Yet loftier Temples undecayed. Mine eye  
“ Glanced from their hideous prodigies afraid,  
“ With faltering haste the tired foot hurried by :  
“ She walked, indeed, as Mistress through the place,  
“ Where nothing else had ever been since Death.  
“ Huge pillars, rank by rank, with solid base  
“ And flower-encircled capitals, arrayed—  
“ I saw, nor such had seen till then. Night’s breath



“ Scarce stirred—the briar high-rooted hung its thorns  
“ From some fair cornice light and motionless ;  
“ Or veiled the prostrate altar whose curled horns  
“ Lay broken, piled midst heaps of sculptured frieze  
“ And gilded architrave.

“ At length we press  
“ With feet which ill-sustain the aching knees,  
“ One wide continuous flight of steps, so fair—  
“ They seem a road for Gods constrained through love  
“ To pass from Heaven, and men ascend by turns  
“ Drawn panting thither. Of bright-hued pavement  
rare

“ Resound the moonlit terraces above,  
“ Quick smitten by our sandal'd feet: their urns  
“ Are burst or fallen, and ancient fountains dry.  
“ Beneath us, toward the left, mine eyes descry  
“ A river, such as this, with banks as wide,  
“ Tumultuous waters rolling: and on high,  
“ From end to end, along the adverse side,  
“ That mighty mansion where Assyrian kings

- “ Two ill-enduring ages strength consumed,  
“ Building its towers:—there piled Earth’s precious  
things,  
“ The riches of mankind, the toil and cost  
“ Of many generations. These presumed  
“ Their seat was safe for ever ! it had lost  
“ Its pleasant ornaments—the doors were gone—  
“ The porch stood vacant—roofs of ponderous stone  
“ Were pierced, and twisted thorns hung through them ;  
yet  
“ A look like ruined greatness unsubdued  
“ Remained, reproachful majesty—the mien  
“ Of that which mourns, indeed, but keeps its state—  
“ Glorious though fallen—supreme midst solitude.  
“ A title still was there—or such had been—  
“ Disjointed words appeared above the gate :  
“ The moon shone full, but all I read was this :—  
“ ‘ *Let Earth with awe rejoice before its Queen !*  
“ ‘ *Grief never may approach Semiramis.*’  
“ Both entered, and the Sorceress at my side,

“ With slackened pace through painted galleries,  
“ Holding one hand in hers—a silent guide,  
“ Passed cautiously yet unperplexed. Nor there  
“ Darkness so far prevailed but that mine eyes  
“ Might trace the remnant of Assyria’s pride  
“ On floors of jasper-tinted marbles still,  
“ —Strewn from the flowery roof and cornice rare  
“ While moonbeams lay upon them. By her skill  
“ We trod that mournful labyrinth of halls,  
“ And chambers built for mirth. The last was dark :  
“ There paused she, whispering—‘ tarry on the sill,’  
“ So passed within. Some voice beyond her calls,  
“ Not hers—nor answers she : against the door  
“ I lean, and listen to her steps—a spark  
“ Drops from her hands, and kindles on the floor :  
“ Thence lamps she lights along those Temple-walls,  
“ But most above its altar. Piles of wood  
“ Lay ready for the sacrifice—behind,  
“ An idol winged with axe uplifted stood,  
“ Rach or Adrammalech : my search could find

- “ Nor Priest, nor living victim there—unless  
“ Such, she and I ; but vessels, one of blood,  
“ One salt, one oil, I saw. That startling guess  
“ —Myself might be the sacrifice—appeared  
“ Less dreadful then : tired Nature asked repose—  
“ The spirit grows patient which so long has feared,  
“ And slacks its flight from death through weariness.  
“ She knelt above the altar steps—she rose,  
“ Descended, sprinkled blood upon the ground,  
“ And uttered prayers inaudible to me :  
“ Then, beckoning, made me enter ; at her side  
“ I stood, while thus she spake. ‘ The lost is found—  
“ ‘ A Princess from the desert fountain—see !  
“ ‘ A captive maid—shall this become the bride ?’  
“ So called and questioned she, but none replied.  
“ ‘ Shall other blood be spilt ?’—Then paused once  
more—  
“ The Temple soon grew silent when her voice  
“ Had compassed it and passed away. In wrath  
“ Those altar steps she mounted—from the floor

“ Took fire, and lit the wood—‘ Thou hadst thy choice !

“ ‘ The aged and mighty yet a mightier hath—

“ ‘ Chaldæa bears thy curse—is this the maid ?’

“ ‘ Can wisdom turn it back ?’ The idol’s hand

“ Let fall his axe—forth from the altar came,

“ Midst sounds like sighs, a voice which cried—‘ she  
is’—

“ ‘ How long ?’ the Sorceress questioned—‘ While the  
land

“ ‘ Shall see its crown upon her brows,’ ’twas said,

“ ‘ Force, famine, fraud, avail not—flood or flame,

“ ‘ Nor Gods, nor men, nor living things, nor dead,

“ ‘ Can touch its peace to harm it.’ ‘ Tell me this—

“ ‘ By whom anointed ?’—‘ Thou !’—‘ Wherewith ?’—  
‘ Behold !’—

“ The Sorceress smiled, and from those urns of gold

“ Sprinkling both oil and salt upon my head,

“ Cried, ‘ Hail Chaldæa’s Queen ! Hail Nitocris !’

“ Then on the altar cast them, fiercely rolled

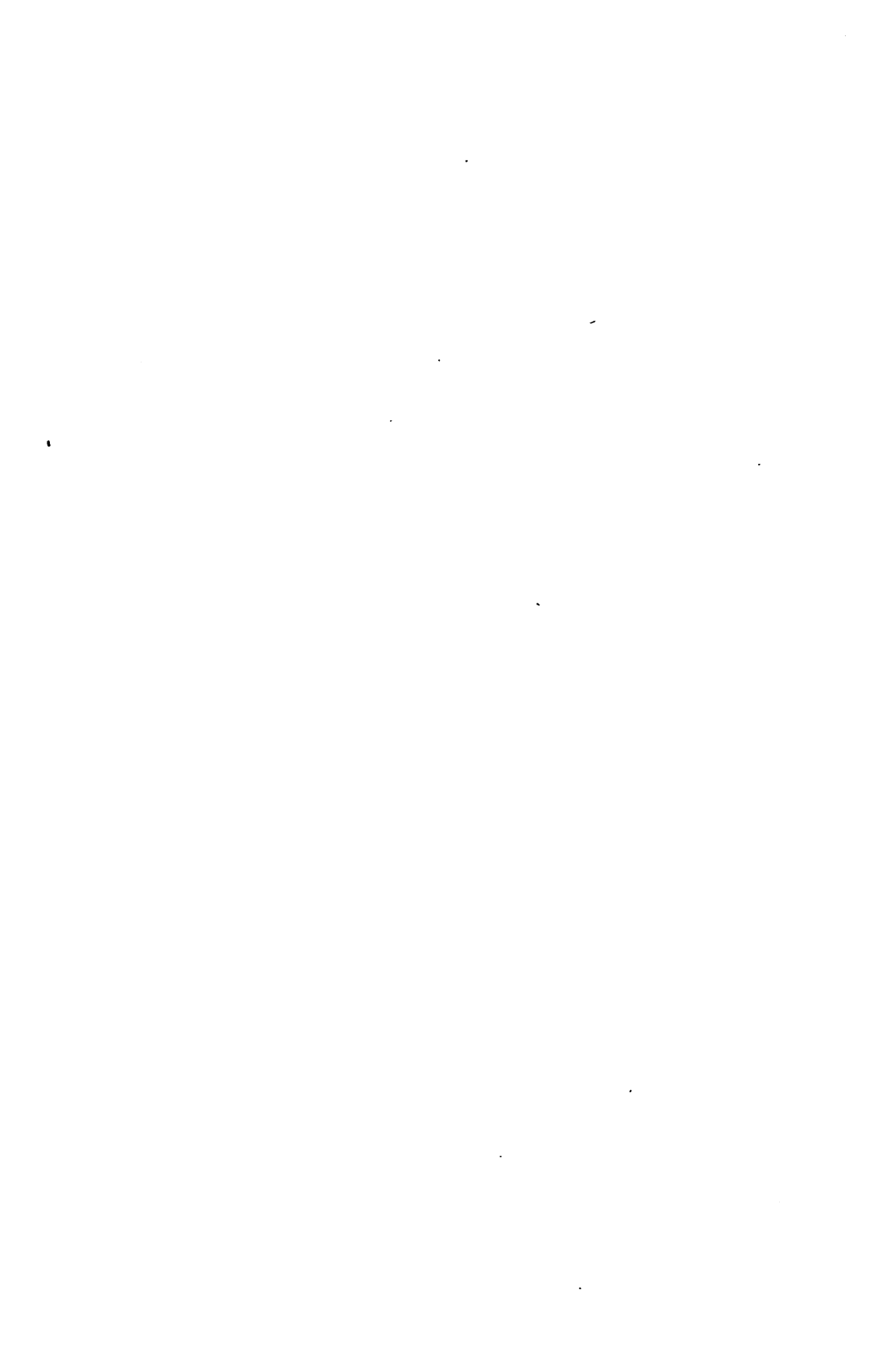
“ The augmented flames—a noise like hosts which fled

“ Shook wall and roof—mine eyes were fixed on her—

“ ‘ Follow thou me,’—she cried—‘ swift, swift, away !

“ ‘ Morn glows in Heaven—be ever blessed the day !

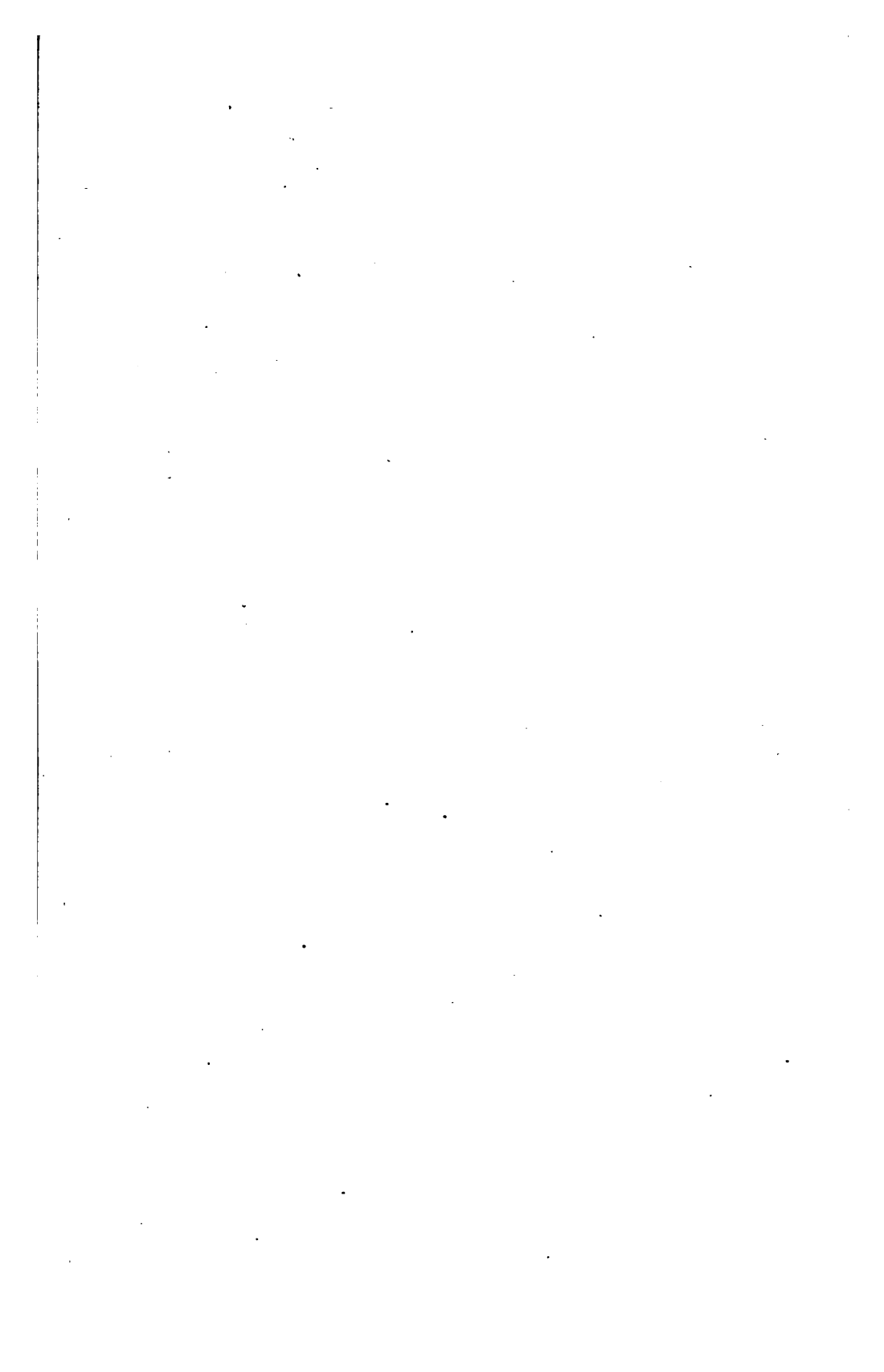
“ ‘ Assyria’s gods are gone ! they flee from Nineveh.’ ”



**THE IMPIOUS FEAST.**

**BOOK VI.**





# THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

## BOOK VI.

---

WHAT can avail Earth's chill solemnities  
To those for whom her bosom is a grave—  
Her last best gift some dust where grief may sleep?  
Wealth, grandeur, empire, praise—to him that dies?  
These might be worth man's wishes, if to have  
Were to possess for ever; or the deep,  
In which lie wrecked his thoughts and vanities,  
Would yield them back hereafter; but to weep  
The things he cannot gain, or could not keep  
If they were his—to covet, gather, save,

And vex his soul in following that which flies,  
Or he soon must fly from—thus to reap  
With those that sow the wind, nay more, to waive  
For such, his claim on life's realities,  
And all which God hath promised! Fool confest!  
Pomp shall attend upon thee like the plume  
They bear before our coffins: it can last  
No longer thine than while the mourners rest,  
As Earth is given to Earth, around thy tomb,  
And then becomes another's—thou dost cast  
Thy soul away! Thus wisdom daily cries  
From street to street, and twice ten centuries  
Hath daily cried—the present and the past  
Hear, and have heard, believing—Nature's voice,  
All that we know, acknowledge, feel—replies,  
Attesting this. O! who with such a choice  
Would doubt, or not distrusting, take the worse?  
Alas! the young, the old, the great, the wise,  
The wise in secular wisdom—such as shine  
High midst their generation, and are stars

Ambition steers by—these prefer a curse,  
Confessing that it is one, and repine  
Alike be it gained or lost. The hero's wars,  
The usurper's tyranny, the statesman's toils,  
Are all that glory may adorn his hearse,  
Or dreams of power his slumber—avarice soils  
Our peace for less—and even the poet's verse  
Gains, if so much, no more !

They too of tardier spirit,  
Will run, and swiftly, in a race like this,  
Though none may win. The Christian mother brings  
Her child to God—kneels by that fountain's side  
Which cleanses guilt, and whence the else lost inherit,  
As heirs regenerate now their hopes of bliss ;  
Then names, and in its name, abjures the unhallowed  
things

Of this vain world—pomp, lucre, glory, pride,  
All covetous desires—all lusts—and by  
That mournful symbol of our peace—the sign  
Of wrath dispersed—presents to Him who died

Both heart and soul—so, as he died, to die ;  
And so to rise from sin. Next, line by line,  
Instructs Christ's lisping servant at her side ;  
—Yea, ere its tender lip can modulate  
The vows then made—whose glorious banners shine  
O'er Death—whose child she is—whose name to fear,  
Wherewith to be content, and what to hate.

Good seed well sown—yet tares for fruit appear !  
A darker radiance trembles in her eye ;  
With softer grace expands the innocent breast—  
Love's warmth is chastened by its purity.  
Alas ! the world contemned till known, is dear,  
So rules at last—drives out one dangerous guest,  
And fills his place with seven ! That guide is near ;  
But different precepts suit maturity :  
Her daily lesson *now* is how to prize  
Enough the chance of greatness—how to reach  
Wealth, honour, power—for these to pant, to sigh,  
Contend with nature, change, retract, disguise,  
And make the world renounced a Deity.

Its maxims are her proverbs—she can teach  
Equivocation even with God—debate  
—A casuist skilled in fortune's mysteries—  
Of lying thrift, herself expert in lies—  
Commend the broad paved way and open gate ;  
And mock the vows she uttered on her knees :  
This world's disclaimer soon grows worldly wise,  
The titled Atheist takes her if he please,  
Or missing him, some fool nor rich nor great.

What marvel then if that young heart rebel,  
Whose frailties make the burden of my tale ?  
Her's is no trivial change—if grandeur raise  
Its mists before her, pity while she strays :  
Prophetic signs accomplished—witchcraft's spell—  
The words of truth—of falsehood—both prevail !  
Be youth's first wanderings wheresoe'er forgot ;  
In age, and more than once, the wisest fell.  
Ye shadeless spirits ! ye souls without a blot !  
Unsullied, unattempted, spare to rail !  
For strength, since strong, be praise to Him that gave :

Angels have disobeyed—so guard you well !  
Though crowns will never move you, and the spot  
Your thoughts can compass seem in Fortune's scale  
But dust compared with all she yet may have,  
The wise sometimes are weak—man's might at best is  
frail !

Whatever was of old, before the blight  
Which came with time o'er all we wish or dare,  
Smothering our aspirations, till despair  
Hath poisoned enterprise—when Nature's light  
Unsullied on Earth's elder children shone,  
Engendering high conceptions, projects rare  
If profitless, and suited to the might  
They felt—gigantic labours—marvels shown  
By remnants almost more than human, still :  
Whatever was designed as great or fair  
—And then the power to perfect tasked the will—  
Hath had its lessened image since ; a shade  
Reflected feebly from the depth which gapes  
Between this world and theirs. We too have laid

Our wide foundations, and have borrowed shapes  
From those they left us—measuring to a span  
Towers, columns, temples ; yet the mightiest fade,  
A late and sickly offspring, ere the sires  
Are touched by age—immortal but for man.  
Their dead surpass our living—and their tomb  
Is larger than our Palace ! Freshly spires  
The Memphian obelisk o'er twice-founded Rome,  
Two thousand winters younger. Adrian's mole  
Scarce less surpasses in its might and years  
The old and strong with us. Crop after crop  
Hath risen to perish—bulk without the soul  
Which godlike genius breathes in all he rears,  
Quickening against corruption. Daily drop  
Our works to dust ; but still men toil amain,  
And wisely toil they, suiting what they do  
With what they are. We have our wonders too—  
Moles, temples, ramparts ; art extends her chain  
O'er earth and sea, pierces the mountain through,  
Paves roads above the wave, and scoops again



—For this Chaldæan kings had also done—  
Broad paths beneath.

One mighty work alone  
Hath left no shadow on the earth : it stood,  
A solitary hill o'er wall and plain,  
Between those rival mansions where abode  
Apart the sovereign mother and the son.  
On either side were they—Euphrates flowed  
Through marble banks before it. High in air  
The adulteress Nature crowned her spurious child  
With ever-verdant leaves and flowerets rare :  
A living garland on his brows she laid  
To bloom for years in lustre undefiled ;  
With spring to bloom and change, but never fade—  
A hill of caves which human hands had made—  
A garden lifted from the earth—a wild  
Where roes unscared might range the forest shade  
Half-way toward Heaven—while deep in grots beneath  
Mirth beat, with rapid heel, the vaulted ground,  
And stretched its feasts till midnight ; Love's warm  
breath

In eager whispers mingling with the sound  
Of choral voices tuned themselves to love :  
But neither mirth nor music reached above—  
There room to build the bashful ring-dove found ;  
The hind in silence pastured midst the grove.

Powers boast, arts wonder, glory's resting-place !  
If Egypt's pyramids were piled as one,  
They still were less in bulk, and short in height.  
First from the loaded earth a level base,  
Like theirs, uprose—compact of ponderous stone,  
With granite steps around it. Square and straight  
That lofty platform stood, and every face  
East, West, North, South, was equal. Wide the plain,  
Sufficient to have borne a conqueror's state,  
With all his hosts pavilioned o'er its space,  
Sheltered from summer's heat, or winter's rain ;  
Ere roofs were curved above the darkened floor,  
A hundred broad-ribbed vaults, in height and span  
Each like that caverned pass which joins the shore  
Of Posilippo to Pozzuoli,

Near Virgil's tomb—as spacious, lofty, wide,  
And twice as long, the twilight grotto ran,  
Ranged equal with its fellows side by side—  
Cool haunts where beauty heard or breathed the sigh—  
Impervious shades at noon and hushed obscurity.

Once more—behold ! the enduring toil began,  
A second stage on this ! Vaults arched as high,  
In length and number equal ; but that here  
—So vast the imperious builder's heart and plan—  
Each front recedes a space from that below,  
Where gardens blooming in the light of even ;  
Trees, fountains, terrace-urns, and steps appear ;  
Midst granite sphinxes, oaks and cedars grow :  
Again, a leafy zone, a loftier tier  
Like this benched in—less wide as nearer Heaven :  
Still height o'er height, and range o'er range uprear  
Their shortening lines, where cooler breezes blow ;  
A fourth, and yet a fifth—the number ends with seven !

Millions of busy hands, well-practised art,  
The whole world's wealth, a will imperial,

Peace, with long leisure after conquest, all  
Conspired to build: but chance supplied a part,  
Here, as elsewhere, surpassing all. The soil  
Produced the architect—its substance lending  
To take what form he pleased; and one day's toil  
Kneading its fat viscosity to shape,  
Equalled a month's from granite quarries rending  
Rocks piece by piece, less durable beside  
Than clay kiln-burnt thus tempered. Fissures gape,  
Bituminous chasms and wells through all that plain  
Gurgling asphaltic cement: such a tide,  
Exhaustless still, prolific Nature pours,  
Concocting there her pitchy slime in vain.

Thence Babylon's surpassing greatness—towers,  
Walls, arches, temples, palaces—aloof  
From earth, though earth-created. Scrupulous pride  
With gold and marble crusts her works again,  
Covering unsightly strength, till floor and roof  
Reflect each other's lustre. That warm sky  
Corrupts not—winter with its winds and rain

Smites harmless on the casing porphyry,  
Imperishable, stainless, smooth. Even here  
Midst these huge vaults, if less adorned, the sight  
Finds nothing vile—though coarser blocks appear  
Ill-squared and roughly chisel'd ; still on high  
Green tendrils creep along Telassar's stone,  
Fronting the grotto's face with foliage light,  
'Twixt cave and cave tenacious. Tufts adhere  
Within, of mossy verdure, thickly sown  
On walls which art had fashioned for delight,  
Distilling coolness through their porous sides :  
Arches are ceiled with stalactites depending  
O'er shell-strewn pavements, such as Ocean hides  
In coral rocks scooped daily by its tides  
Beneath the roots of some far promontory,  
Or nymph-frequented isle.

Though near its ending,  
Chaldæa's aged protectress—ere the rest  
Of that which shook her hearer's heart was told—  
Paused as from weariness. A noise suppress,

Light-trampling feet, and voices awe-controul'd,  
In busier reverence fluttered through her halls:  
From galleries flowered with many-coloured stone  
Inlaid, and ivory passages, its sound  
Uprose, but soon was hushed again: o'er walls  
Mosaic, strewed with gold, the red sun shone:  
Faint rainbows floating midst the fountain's spray,  
Dashed light beneath on tessellated ground;  
A crimson radiance issued from the throne.  
At length she spake: "What else remains to say,  
"Hereafter may be told thee—this is shown,  
"—If words fulfilled attest the Prophetess—  
"That I till now have turned some curse away  
"Which henceforth points toward thee and Babylon;  
"Darts of innocuous hate—for she can bless  
"Above such threatenings, and hath showered to-day  
"Woes on his head that harms thee. Weaker, less,  
"Vile even amongst the vile—a robber's slave—  
"Captive to him that made me such—was I:  
"She brought and placed me where I am—she gave

“ Earth’s sceptre twice, with joint supremacy  
“ And power through all its realms to slay or save,  
“ Once singly uncontroul’d.

“ But let us rest :

“ Eve’s cooler fragrance woos us hence ; its gale  
“ More freshly breathes around us ; and the west,  
“ Mingling all hues, with softer light illumines  
“ City and plain, Bel’s arrowy glare restraining :  
“ Hid in some spicy brake, the nightingale  
“ Her song, suspended since day’s prime, resumes ;  
“ Till sorrow seem love’s natural voice—complaining  
“ Of Grief to Solitude.”

She said, and straight

Both rose, together up that breezy height  
From terrace steps to terrace steps ascending,  
On silken couches lightly borne along  
By practised shoulders changed ere tired for more,  
And swift as scarcely conscious of their weight ;  
Though half in fear her raptured gaze extending,  
The virgin sees fair feast, or feasted throng,

Whose sandals beat upon the grotto's floor  
Quick, yet in measured cadence just and even,  
Ruled by sweet melody; long lines of light—  
Not needless though the sun is yet in Heaven—  
Tables, and happy guests within. The song  
A moment hears she, and the harp. But chief  
Those pendent groves delighted her—the shade  
Of loftiest palms, huge oaks, and fragrant limes,  
—Each stately growth according to its leaf,  
Pine, cedar, cypress, ilex, all arrayed  
In ranks that mix not alien hues and climes,  
Though all are here. Fountains disperse their spray  
Midst dusky foliage showering: undismayed  
—Since nothing fears which knows not injury—  
Their burnished plumes the sportive fowl display,  
As if they brought a sunbeam from the sky,  
Fluttering where love may call from glade to glade,  
Or perch beside their nests, and end in song the day.  
Stage after stage ascend they: every knee  
Before them bows—the path beneath is strown



With vests and flowers—yet all the slaves they see  
Are sparks of glory round Belshazzar's throne !  
Among those many thousand guests, not one  
Is less than princely ; each in his degree  
Ascends the appropriate grade, by right his own  
Of merit or grace—to lose is to be lost ;  
They seldom fall but once !

Upon that stair

Which rises highest from Earth and Babylon—  
Now standing on that height, she looks beneath :  
Thus he whose footsteps climb some mountain coast,  
Stops giddily aloft with pent in breath,  
To watch the bursting surf and foaming shore  
—As if his heart's vibration might suffice  
Perchance to shake him headlong from his post—  
He plants, with special heed, one foot before,  
Then leans the way he gazes not, and eyes,  
With all his weight thrown back, the precipice.  
So poised the maid her body against her fears—  
For never till that day those feet had been

Above the Earth's dull level—nor her ears  
From hill or airy crag had gathered sounds.  
Sent up by man or nature. Towers were seen  
Between the branches of her native grove,  
But all remote—and seldom from its bounds  
She strayed or wished to tarry. Behold, outspread,  
Coloured by eve, the firmament above !  
Arched till Heaven's confine and the Earth's seemed one—  
Unbroken, but that still its blasted head  
Ambition's old offence o'er all upraising,  
Far loftier laughed at rivalry : around  
The whole world's wealth summed up in Babylon;  
Even to its gates entire !

She would have found

'The trees about her dwelling-place, and gazing  
Have sent her sighs toward home—but redly shone  
Day's parting radiance on a hundred more—  
Groves, thickets, forests—in that spacious bound,  
As large, a hundred larger. Roofs like gold,  
And lustrous domes above their summits blazing,

Vast ill-distinguished piles remote, that bore  
Their shapeless bulk, through changes manifold  
Themselves unchanged, from Nimrod down to Bel.  
Such saw the maid o'er oaks perchance as old—  
Fabrics of dubious use and history,  
—Fane, palace, sepulchre, or citadel—  
Midst endless ranks of rounded porphyry,  
Huge shafts prodigious then in girth and height,  
Now ill-believed if told. With heart elate  
—Though doubly warned as holiest records tell—  
Their second founder more august, in bliss  
—If bliss there be to solitary state—  
Godlike above his works, hence cried, ere fell  
The bestial change predicted—“Is not this  
My home—my kingdom's majesty—the great—  
The beautiful—this Babylon?” And well  
—Were arrogant boasts the sinless right of man—  
Well might such glorying fall from lips whose breath  
Could work so far creatively!

Beneath,

Within the city's compass proudly ran  
Euphrates, first of streams, his fanes reflecting,  
A long day's journey banked by palaces.  
Streets throbbed throughout with pulse-like life, collect-  
ing,  
Dispersing, mingling, changing crowds—impeded,  
And spacious as they were, too narrow for the press.  
The house-roofs glowed with crimson revellers,  
Some new device or scurril sport expecting—  
While crowned buffoons their claims of conquest pleaded,  
Or mimic Cyrus mourned his own distress.  
Walls seem to live, the plethoric city stirs—  
Suburban idols lead their worshippers—  
A busy hour is this for idleness.

From dreams of speechless wonder starts the Maid,  
Recalled by Nitocris. A gate of brass  
Behind her sees she guarded, and a wall  
Crowned with fair towers above, to keep the shade  
Untrespassed on that kingly mountain's head,  
Where only two—with those they bring—may pass:

Just bound prescribed by sovereignty—thence all  
Unsummoned must recede beside. Outspread,  
The royal ensigns glitter at the gate :  
Armed eunuchs watch before them : verdant grass,  
Lawns far retiring, dark and silent woods,  
—How much unlike the world beheld so late !—  
Appear within—dispersed or clustered trees,  
And hills, for hills stand here the spicy mounds  
Which skreen again those gardens, whence the breeze  
Steals fragrance, and autumnal rain in floods  
Swells to its brim the unsullied lake below.  
There drinks the stately hart, the chamois bounds,  
All harmless creatures range its solitudes—  
And thence the terrace fountains largely flow,  
The grotto roofs are dewed, the palace halls  
Refreshed with sparkling coolness. Art presides  
Conspicuous o'er the mountain's caverned sides,  
With statues, terrace steps, and many a row  
Of palms or cedars arched above ; but here,  
Hidden on its spacious summit, changed and shy,

Averse from praise, she works as Nature guides ;  
Least happy if her cautious steps appear,  
Or name be heard—like bashful Charity,  
The fame she earns, she yields ; the aid she lends, she  
hides.

To pity some ascribe her labours—love—  
And beauty's tears—who tell of times gone by  
So far, they scarce know when—a Median Bride,  
Youthful and newly throned, that wept the grove,  
The stream, and valley near her native home—  
One whom dread Nature nursed in infancy  
And never weaned—though great, ill-satisfied,  
She loathed the eternal plain, and longed to roam  
Through wilder shades upon the mossy side  
Of mountain heights sequestered—hence uprose  
From human hands, love wrought so mightily,  
Hills seated in mid-air, a forest in the sky.

Thus some declare, and most incline to those :  
Others assert an earlier cause, and trace  
The first suggestion to repentant guilt—

Grieved memory fixed on pristine innocence :  
These mount above the date of human woes  
Ere man was cursed, and all his spotted race  
To be, through him. The pile, they say, was built  
A record of his happier state, and whence  
He fell transgressing—image of the place  
That once stood near, now lost.

Ailona, raising

Delighted eyes, those woods and lawns surveyed :  
Next scaled their grassy mound—like Eve still pure  
Far o'er the world, then new, in wonder gazing—  
Toward all Chaldæa's plains, her paler face,  
With lips apart yet voiceless, turned the Maid  
From this its Paradise—both too secure,  
Though duly warned ! But different what they saw :  
Here were no dreadless herds in silence grazing  
At large ! unshepherded—no vacant fields  
Untilled—no pathless solitudes : with awe  
The Maid of Israel cast her dazzled sight  
On earth, sown thick for leagues with helmets and shields,

Assembled nations, armies infinite,  
The city round her feet—beyond a world at war.  
Vast scene—almost too glorious for delight!  
Even to the tents of Cyrus reached her eyes,  
Though far away—where cleft Euphrates yields,  
And guards on either side, broad space between—  
Numerous as those white clouds on vernal skies  
Crumbling the freckled blue ere winds arise,  
And strewing Heaven with flakes. The silent Queen  
Pondered what seemed like labour in despite,  
Or shame that lingers yet, though courage dies—  
Envy against the conqueror's joy—disdain  
Which stops to turn and threaten ere its flight.  
Intent she looked awhile, then spake: "The plain  
" They moat in front with trenches deep and wide,  
" Coupling its streams. We thought the Median wise,  
" But thus past hope he toils through shame or pride—  
" Perhaps both—for such near opposites may meet.  
" There let him dig or build—till winter's rain,  
" Sweeping his earth-made bulwarks from his feet,



“ In floods unite those parted streams again—

“ A day too late his tents are fortified :

“ Such tardy prudence bears ill fruit.”—O thou !

Before so vigilant—that dost debate

Of others’ wisdom !—snares thou canst not see,

Or seeing regardest not, are round thee now—

Alas ! the wise, the aged, the just, the great !

In tears thy race began, in groans its end must be !

They turn, descending to the still lake’s side,

And sit where myrtle branches whiten—where

The mossy turf is starred with half-closed flowers,

Though moist, not yet forsaken of the bee :

Past sunset now his drowsy sounds abide

A little longer in the twilight air

Both violet tinged and scented : lightly showers

The temperate Spring her pearls on grass and tree.

To one who sits, half nature’s wealth is new :

Ailona marvels at the shapes below

Like spirits of fire unquenched midst that pure tide,

Armed in bright panoply of burnished scales,

Vermilion streaked and azure. Here her view  
She fixes dubious on the stately roe  
Carrying her crest erect through woods and vales—  
Fawn, or familiar hart, with antlers wide  
And golden collar round a neck of snow.  
But when the gentle beast draws near them—woe!  
Woe! when it rests its head upon her knee,  
Stretching at length before her!—Shall she hide  
With breath suppress her terrors from the foe  
Whose broad eye watches hers so fixedly?  
A little higher behind, the laughing Queen  
Sees one small foot drawn in prepared to flee,  
And marks how pale her cheeks—then what a glow  
Suffused by shame hath tinged their ivory,  
And spread its roses downward to the zone:  
Soon flowers are plucked for food, with joyful mien  
The adventurous hand extended.

Nor alone

Well pleased, the gracious mother bends her eye  
Benign, and prone to love: another face

Looks down, though near, midst playful cares unseen,  
Changed from its pride through beauty's potency,  
And chastened by the rays of that young grace  
Which lives and dies with innocence. At last  
The Virgin turns, and o'er her on the green  
Behold! a brow whose cloudier moods have cast  
Sorrow and fear—where spreads the human race  
Shame, with perplexity—but now serene,  
Eased of its frowns and diadem. Submiss  
—Her eyes declined, and bosom beating fast—  
Ailona kneels before him on the place;  
While thus, uprising slow, aged Nitocris:

“ The Gods are watchful for my Son in this—

“ Glory his own hand purchaseth—of old,

“ Wealth, empire, majesty, next theirs in Heaven,

“ Were sovereign rights inherited—but bliss

“ To whom they will they grant, from whom withhold;

“ No human might can reach, nor keep when given.”

So she; in mirth the sportive king replied:

“ But yet with threats they send it—woe on woe!

“ Accursed be he that spurns.”—The Sorceress cried :

“ Woe to the imperious city’s haughtiness !

“ If she shall weep—woe to tongue of pride !”—

“ Why threats to me and terrors ? am I their foe ?

“ What need of forced acceptance ?—this is well,

“ They did not give that dark-faced Prophetess,

“ And leave no choice but wrath, or one like her.

“ There might have been indeed a task for Bel,

“ If she had come both Queen and Messenger !

“ But they who sent thee, Maid, must mean to bless :—

“ Thou shalt be happier than they bid—as high

“ As they themselves could place thee—thou shalt have

“ From me unasked whatever they confer—

“ Whatever they retain but immortality.”

So spake he, gazing on her face upraised

With looks ’twixt love and wonder. Gladly smiled

Those lips parental first—then changed to grave,

Rebuked his heedless pride in accents mild.

“ Be such as love and bless us, blessed and praised !

“ This cannot burden thankfulness. For me—

“ All that I have, or had, that Sorceress gave—  
“ Life, glory, empire—what could I repay ?  
“ Our solitary grandeur yields but sighs :  
“ Too high from men for human converse we !  
“ But blessed is love with one so fair and wise ;  
“ —How fair thou seest—how wise I found to-day—  
“ It costs small labour here to walk with destiny.”

Once more the joyful Monarch laughed and said :

“ O still revered ! directress of mine eyes !  
“ Meek herald of my better thoughts—and now  
“ Their just interpreter !—be Heaven obeyed  
“ Which sends a Goddess on its embassies.  
“ Sometimes perplexed—but ever patient thou !  
“ Three days Belshazzar strives to please the Skies—  
“ The first is almost gone—to-morrow brings,  
“ Till eve, laborious sacrifices—toils  
“ In bloody gifts to weariness—the last  
“ We feast in glory, served by captive kings :—  
“ And Princes great as kings were once, ere past  
“ The flood which gathered empires with their spoils

“ In heaps for us, shall eat as well as I.

“ It is the last great day to Babylon !

“ Then, since thyself hath willed it, at my side

“ In equal honour seated on her throne—

“ Above the injurious thoughts of rivalry—

“ She shall be worshipped both as Queen and Bride.”

Thus said, he turned away—the Queens descended,  
For stars appeared though few, and feebly shone  
With horns acute Night’s paler lamp above.  
By still augmenting crowds to Earth attended  
They went—but never from that Virgin’s breast  
Did hope, or dread, or regal pageant shake  
Thoughts of the ancient Sire, and lonely Grove  
Beneath whose shade had been her childhood’s rest :  
She could divine his terrors for her sake,  
And knew how rash the impatience of his love.  
Such told she Nitocris, then kneeling spake :  
“ Gracious beyond my thoughts in all thy ways—  
“ Add this in pity toward the old—bestow  
“ The time which yet remains on both—two days !

“ For such a change how brief ! ” — “ There needs not now  
“ That tremulous voice,” she said, “ or suppliant knee—  
“ Beloved—betrothed—it is thy will—and thou  
“ Art great as I.”

Those sportive gallies flee  
With arms and lights around her on the tide,  
Troubling its torch-lit surface in their race—  
Again, behind the whitened waters hiss,  
While drops like liquid silver fall beside,  
Shook from the oar to melt upon its face.  
There princely Mirria waits—a matron she,  
Revered as wise, and loved of Nitocris—  
In silent awe observant near the Bride :  
That laughing sisterhood, when noon was high,  
So pleased, so fond, officious, proud, and free,  
Sit at the Virgin’s feet demurely shy,  
Even smiles perplex the bashful company.  
Lo ! prostrate thousands meet her on the shore :  
Streets where the Captive passed, a public show,  
Since morn, or trod in hopeless flight before,

Pursued by drunken cries—through these they ride  
Each on her couch—herself a deity !

The sacred cymbals clash, the torches glow,  
While sceptred heralds bid their slaves adore.  
That grove seems blessed, at length, or purified—  
Tamed Superstition hides her scruples here ;  
Its blasted trees can harbour death no more—  
Who dreads the shade where Love and Power reside ?  
The fear of kings hath chased all baser fear,

She finds not whom she seeks—to threat—to pray—  
In turn to be derided and reviled—  
Since morn, alas ! till now, from street to street,  
That wretched Sire explores the public way—  
Hath any seen Bel's priests, or met his Child ?  
Who shall regard his tears ?—who stop to guide his  
feet ?

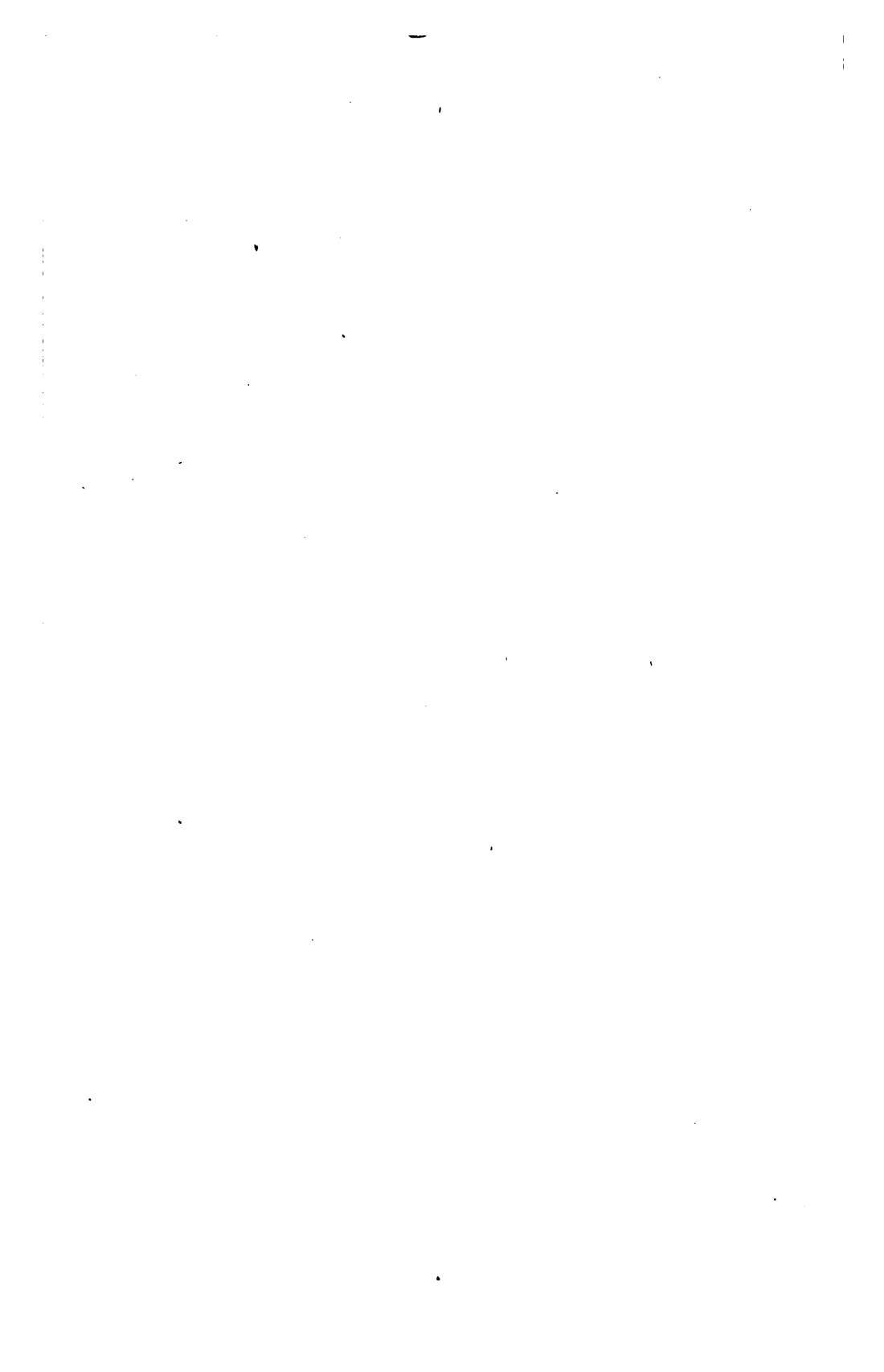
If good men pause and pity—few be they !  
“ So young, thus lost !—so innocent, beguiled !  
“ May God reward the heart which grieves for hers to-  
day !”



In unregarding ears he threats and calls,  
Till sight swims sickly round, and reels the knee  
Unnerved by grief: not choice, but providence,  
Conducts the unconscious Elder whence he came:  
He sees the crowded grove, the guarded walls,  
Arms at his gate, and lamps from every tree—  
Bewildered doubts he if the giddy sense  
Discern aright—what yet appears the same:  
Lo! crimson garments trail along his halls—  
By this he knows that sight is mockery:  
At length a voice is heard which cannot shame—  
The breast, which presses his, Ailona's breast must be.

**THE IMPIOUS FEAST.**

**BOOK VII.**



# THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

## BOOK VII.

---

THREE days, of old, endured the sacrifice,  
From year to year ; a mighty festival  
Observed since Belus reigned in blood and scorn,  
When every heart indulged its own device—  
All foul like this, but this far worse than all :  
Mad with her last night's triumphs, at its dawn  
The Sorceress clamour'd for her guests—and twice  
Earth, Hell, Air, Ocean, listened to the call—  
The drunken harlot riots on her throne ;  
In flocks her lovers speed from earth and sky ;

Chaldæa's idols feast with victory—

“ Three days,” she called aloud, and almost two are  
gone.

Above this empire of our treacherous clay,  
Where man had all things subject once, and still  
Maintains by craft his old supremacy—  
Usurping what he lost where'er he may :  
With hands that never rest sits One to weigh  
The time God gives his creatures as he will,  
Years, months, days, hours, or moments. Close beside  
To watch their uses while they pass away,  
And seal in each the sum of good or ill,  
With eyes that never sleep or close, abide  
Man's grieved accusers to futurity—  
These meekly just their dreadful task fulfil,  
And these shall speak in truth of all that die.

O that his sight could reach so far ! his pride  
At last discern ! his heart awake ! that awe  
Might melt in time his cold obduracy,  
When cities swoln with insolence, deride

Whatever God delights in, and abhor  
The few that serve him undefiled—that now  
These swarms which settle round the house of Bel—  
These multitudes of multitudes which hide  
Court, area, steps, bridge, terrace, all below—  
Thick as Egyptian locusts when they fell  
A plague to cover and consume ; but white,  
With sacrificial vestures beautified,\*  
As Oreb's manna, or Bethulia's snow :  
Millions which breathe, think, reason, plan, confer ;  
Feel hope, love, pleasure, could they lift their sight  
So high, or hear time's pitying angel say :  
“ This and another night for mirth—but woe !  
“ Long warned in vain—thou worse than Nineveh !  
“ Woe Tyranness ere the second morning's light !  
“ There yet is given for sport or prayer—a day—  
“ To finish, to begin, or leave undone—  
“ Once more the sun will set on Babylon ;  
“ Those heedless millions then must pass away ;

\* 2 Kings x. 22.

“ ‘Three days,’ thine heralds cried, and almost two are  
gone !”

Why are her courts so silent? Why so calm  
That sea beneath of worshippers—where each  
Gleams like a wave which ripples toward the beach,  
Lost and dissolved ere marked? That human swarm,  
Why are its murmurings hushed so soon? The breeze  
Is moving o’er their heads, the sun is setting,  
All eyes are raised, but still no human speech—  
A million faces gaze one way toward Heaven;  
Before Bel’s tower are bent a million knees;  
A million hearts with one great thought are beating—  
High on the steps, the platforms, porticos,  
To every lesser God are victims given;  
Dread Nature’s emblems, types of winds and seas,  
Earth, and prolific fire—whatever grows,  
Breathes, lives, or generates life—in shapes obscene,  
Brought from their groves to shame the light of even,  
And compassed by their priests as deities!

Before the temple gate stand thickly these:

Chaldæa's mightier gods are dimly seen  
Far off, within—for on their altars yet  
No fire is kindled, and the pillar'd maze  
—Ill-lit by lamps that ever burn between—  
Looks roofless, limitless, while day decays,  
Bel's sceptred image once in Dura set,  
The whole world's worship still, with regal mien  
Asserts his ancient sovereignty—of gold  
And towering o'er his moulten guests. Like pines  
In height they rise—first Benoth, crowned as Queen,  
With crescent diadem—Moloch next—and near  
Adrammalech—Salembas—Nebo old—  
And Syrian Nisroch, fettered midst their shrines,  
Ill-reconciled, and winged for flight. In many a fold  
Its scaly length the aspiring serpent twines:  
The ever-present dove seems brooding here—  
Reptiles and fish Phœnician idols hold—  
A hundred monstrous shapes, and all of lust or fear.  
But deeply breathe the listening worshippers:  
Belshazzar stands in darkness by his throne—



The subject kings below as shades appear ;  
Crowds press on crowds, but not a whisper stirs !  
Earth waits the signal of its God returning ;  
His steeds have passed the mountain tops, and none  
Who move upon its even face can see  
More than the fading traces of his wheels ;  
But some are in mid-air who watch them burning  
A moment yet—a little moment he  
Extends his radiance to that height alone ;  
He sinks, he disappears, the trumpet's peals  
Wind down from stage to stage—the psaltery,  
Lute, sackbut, cornet, dulcimer, reply ;  
All kinds of music, soft or shrill, descending  
Awake the silent votary whence he kneels :  
And now the censers smoke—the altars blaze—  
The roof is starred with cressets like a sky—  
With gifts the priests before their shrines are bending ;  
The brightened idols seem to smile and gaze :  
Ten thousand voices mix their melody ;  
Ten times ten thousand more reply again ;

Each swells the choir, for all are skilled in praise:  
Beyond the gates, the steps, the bridge extending,—  
General as winds or seas ascends the strain.

## STROPHE.

Already hast thou waved thine hand, O Bel !  
Thy children hear thee, mighty Lord ! A guest  
He comes who rules their thankful tribes alone—

At his rebuke the rebel Median fell !  
Dread effluence of thy majesty exprest,  
Belshazzar scatters lightnings like thine own :

Earth's subject gods shall worship while we tell  
Thy wrath when envious kings assailed his throne—  
Thy glory, ever blessing, ever blest !

## ANTISTROPHE.

The year is full—the Serpent weds the Dove !  
Tarry to-night with us, to-morrow rise

In brighter radiance from the couch of love ;  
All human sighs are hushed but pleasure's sighs !  
Who shall unbar thy gates, and strew the skies

With earliest flowers before thee? Love, revealed  
At morn among the fading stars above,  
Ere yet thy steeds go forth, or twilight flies  
With tender footsteps from the dewy field,  
And silence follows startled from the grove.

## EPODE.

The vallies when they wake, and while the breeze  
Sweeps with its fragrant wing night's mists away,  
Receive from thee their fruitfulness—the trees  
Are crowned with beauty, and the waters move  
With warmth and life—

## CHORUS.

They tell thy rising—they  
Behold thee, mightiest—wisest—holiest—best!  
Ascending in the noontide blaze of day  
Heaven's towers alone, or stooping toward thy rest,  
Lord of the air! with crimson light array  
The gorgeous skies and mountains of the west.

## STROPHE.

*The Priests of Benoth.*

O circled by the stars ! when tired and still  
All things beside seem slumbering—even the gale  
Partakes with night in Nature's peacefulness !  
Their distant voices sing of thee, O Queen !  
Enthroned amidst their multitudes—the vail

Cooled by thy breath revives—the lighted hill  
Or forest glade, and fragrant bank between,  
Through thee seems sanctified ! She comes to bless !  
The Dove is hovering near—at length our hymns prevail !

## ANTISTROPHE.

Older than ocean thou ! thy full front gazes  
From Heaven delighted on his depths serene ;  
Drawn by its smile of love, the giant raises  
Near as he may, thine image on his wave.

Those tender horns their potent dews distil,  
Crescent or waning, o'er the herbage green  
Mysterious virtues—strong, if good, to save—  
If evil, dreadful in their kinds for ill.

## EPODE.

*The Priests of Adrammalech.*

We see thee in the tempest—hear thee call  
When the earth rocks, Adrammalech ! that chain  
Which binds the frenzied air—the struggling main—  
Involving all things, and sustaining all,  
From star to star—from depth to depth again—  
Shakes stricken by thy might : and when thine eye  
Pierces the forest shade, or echoing hall,  
O ! who shall hide him from thy wrath ? His cry  
Is lost in thunders rolling o'er the slain,  
Or louder threatenings round the ordained to die !

## STROPHE.

*The Priests of Moloch.*

O visible in death ! the mountain pine  
Shows with its blasted strength, thy passing by ;  
Our groves, O Moloch ! reddened with the stain  
Of infant blood—and this before thy shrine :  
The Median heaps unburied on the plain—  
May all avert thy steps—thy couch is in the sky !

## ANTISTROPHE.

*The Priests of Bel.*

These rule with pride unmerciful ! their fire  
Is not of Heaven, nor kindled from the well

Whose streams are life, and whence the almighty Sire  
Primæval, endless, uncreated Bel—

Filled all he made, and sanctified the whole !  
Mild patrons of mankind ! ye radiant five

That watch the earth by turns, and nightly roll  
Your westward wheels for ever—Sheshach, thou  
The shepherd's hope, and greatest still in Hell,  
Relentless Nebo ! by his power ye live,—

## CHORUS.

He framed our breathing flesh, and reasoning soul !  
He gave the stars their glory ! on the brow  
Of every god, through all their hosts, a crown  
In brightness less, in nature like his own !

So they their sacrificial feasts began  
With songs to Bel : but elsewhere wonder bred

Divided thoughts and blank perplexity—  
From house to house the breathless Elder ran,  
Distasteful counsel meeting. Wisdom's cry  
If heard, was ill-discerned, by louder dread  
O'erborn—he hastes and asks, but cannot stay—  
That impious Sorceress haunts the grieved old man !  
Already part is certain that she said :  
The larger half fulfilled within a day  
Shows that the rest is not far off. At length  
From One he looks for help to whom he gave  
—Poor as he was—what fortune could not give—  
Nor time—nor partial nature—more than strength,  
Dominion, riches, honour—though they wreath  
Crowns of no fickle hues to grace our clay,  
But follow from the cradle to the grave—  
True knowledge of his truth through whom we live,  
Whose word received is Life—despised is Death—  
And both for ever—teaching where to pray ;  
In what to hope.

Toward him who sowed aright,

So well was that good ground prepared—the seed  
Brought fruits of thankfulness. By nature blind,  
The Spirit regenerate gloried in its light,  
Zealous to persevere untired : with speed  
Quickened of urgent love, he never looked behind.

Wealth Astath had, yet valued not—the smile  
Of power—his princely equals homage—praise  
Which lingering holds us last ; a proselyte  
And given to God : though foremost in the file  
Of peace or war, his wiser soul inclined  
Toward them whose strength was in their prayers—the  
ways

Of God their boast, their glory to beguile  
With patience grief. A separate people they,  
Like vessels set apart of costlier kind  
To keep some purer spirit unmixed—till One,  
(As early as the stains which still defile,  
Man's hope foretold)—should wash all guilt away,  
And plead accepted at his Father's throne.

To him the Elder went : his child meanwhile



Whose portion seemed the sum of evil or good,  
As hope or fear were strongest—more than Queen,  
Or less and lower than misery yet has been—  
Had found, at last, an hour for solitude ;  
Left by her virgin fellows and their guide,  
The first with hearts brimful. To learn, to teach,  
To press injunctions and retract, they speed  
Perplexed by preparations for the Bride,  
So numerous in so short a space, yet each  
Momentous too !they promise at the gate—  
Despatch, with shorter absence than they need,  
Let loose till eve.

She paced the silent hall,  
Restless both when she rose, and where she sat ;  
Replaced her harp now first unmusical,  
Wishing for those again she wished away so late.  
At length she yields to that which conquers all—  
Tumultuous thoughts and painful lassitude  
Subside in sleep—while hope, remembrance, dread,  
Remitted for a time but not subdued,

Their transient flushes o'er her paleness shed.  
One hand with rosy palm sustains her head,  
Beneath its braids and glossy ringlets prest ;  
Earthward the other lapses. More than death  
By far—since terror cannot reach the dead—  
Is sleep like this? Death heedless to molest,  
Smites hard, then passes on—he stuns and leaves  
But mocks us not—he bears no festal wreath  
To hide the worms that round his temples creep :  
His claims are just—he neither wrongs nor grieves,  
Nor can he come but once. The couch beneath  
Shakes with our panting heart and hard-drawn breath ;  
In dreams we die and live, rejoice and weep,  
Are wronged, despised, abandoned—sometimes blest,  
This never long ! But death perchance is sleep—  
And life death's dream—if so, tired maid lie still !  
The shortest error then were least and best :  
Thy slumbers may be gone too soon ! They came  
Where nothing yet hath staid an hour if ill :  
This is thy native roof—remorse or blame

Abides not here, but o'er that stainless breast—  
Like clouds which leave no trace and never rest—  
Dark thoughts pass swiftly unapproved by will,  
Absolved from guilt, and far remote from shame.

Sleep long deferred will come, at last, with pain :  
The anxious toil in sleep, the wretched mourn—  
To every heart that grieves its pangs return ;  
Smiles fade before him—tears begin again.  
In his stained glass seem all things changed but care :  
Bright glows, at first, the laughing image there—  
And heightened in that mirror bliss describes  
Its wanton roses fresher than of yore—  
Love sees and hears with more than ears or eyes—  
The past gives back its captives to Despair—  
They touch, converse, and gaze—who yet must meet no  
more.

But soon the sultry breath they breathe, the sighs  
Which transport heaves so fast, and pours so near,  
Dim those fair hues surpassing truth before—  
New shapes, that still confess no change, arise ;

Or else distort and foul the same appear.  
Mysterious Sleep ! where life resigns so much,  
Yet quickens what it keeps—reduced, comprest,  
But not impaired—and half its faculties,  
The safer half, employed in flattering such  
We best might spare !

A late and treacherous guest

So visits he that Virgin now ! The sigh  
Which parts thus hardly from her stifled breast  
Betokens grief or pain : and lo ! a tear  
Escapes beneath its long-lashed lid o'erflowing  
—Far as her parted lips—the languid cheek,  
Still undispersed, a pearl on ivory.  
Nor wakes she yet ; the sounds which fill her ear  
Are changed at once by Sleep to help his lie—  
That sportive train, with pleased impatience glowing,  
Each carrying gifts, and all on fire to speak—  
A moment hushed attend the abortive cry,  
The choaking gasp suppressed of agony,

The smothered plaint yet loud and louder growing,  
At last, the call for help, and waking shriek.

“ O Mirria ! this was more than sleep,” she said ;  
“ Cruel to stay so late !—’twere better die  
“ Than see such sights as those again ! The dead  
“ I saw, each crowned and seated on his throne—  
“ Like kings indeed they looked, but yet in misery.”  
Then closely clasped the matron’s neck, that pressing  
A bosom uninflamed, unterrified,  
She might assuage the anguish of her own.  
As mothers soothe with gentlest words alone  
At first, if grief befall their young, caressing,  
Till louder sobs are hushed, and fears subside,  
Yet will be heard in turn whene’er they may :  
So Mirria gave that trembler leave to groan,  
And closely held her speechless where she lay—  
Then mixed rebuke provoking strength through pride—  
Gazed in her face to smile its tears away,  
Replaced her on the couch, and straight replied :

" O Queen, look up ! can dreams afflict thee thus ?

" Left safe at eve, with arms before her gate,

" Shall less than shadows scare Belshazzar's Bride ?

" The dead, though crowned as kings, have fled from us—

" We came not empty back, nor tarried late."

She spake, and next the Maid : " If this were sleep,

" Do Thou instruct who speakest in dreams !—for good

" Art Thou !—what truths they token to me—keep

" My thoughts, thus warned, from sin—with patience

wait

" Till I can learn Thy will !—Such sleep as this

" Comes not to bring us rest. In dreams I stood—

" Since I did dream—upon that garden's height

" Whose mossy glades flower-strewn, and pathways steep,

" Were trod indeed last night with Nitocris.

" The solitary spirit felt its bliss

" At leisure thus a second time to gaze :

" On high the Sun shone opposite, but red,

" Reduced in size, despoiled of all its rays,

“ With light diminished more than half. The Plain,  
“ The City, and the River round me spread—  
“ Seen dimly through that thick and dusky haze :  
“ A sound uprose behind me, such as rain  
“ Rustling midst gusts of wind ; I turned my head,  
“ And on the point next Heaven, with shoulders plumed,  
“ Above me where I stood, had one alighted  
“ Whose starry brow, irradiate by the blaze  
“ Of beams which dazzled not, shone self-illumed,  
“ And brighter than the Sun thus veiled. Serene  
“ But sorrowful, it seemed—I saw delighted,  
“ For fear had not come yet. A summer cloud,  
“ Crossed by the rainbow ere its colours fade,  
“ Appeared his wings outstretched : the pine-tree green  
“ With tenderer verdure freshened in their shade—  
“ If shade—and from the gusty impulse bowed  
“ Its summit, while they closed  
“ Nor pine nor palm  
“ Reached to the sapphire zone about his waist :

“ His right hand held a trumpet, which he raised  
“ And blew so long, so mournfully, and loud,  
“ That ere the blast was ended—while his arm  
“ Kept level with his lips—the yet unknown taste  
“ Of grief like death began: my spirit amazed  
“ Ebbd fast, warm tears ran down my cheeks—that  
    sound  
“ Dissolved all strength in sorrow. But his face  
“ Was lifted toward the stained and crimson Sun,  
“ And mine with his. One spot waxed large in haste;  
“ Descending, darkening, through the sultry space  
“ Blood-red between, it spread its shadow round:  
“ And never yet has time, if counted, run  
“ So swiftly as that second Angel’s pace—  
“ For now behold! another glorious form,  
“ More dreadful than the first, draws near, whose  
    wings  
“ Encompass half the city in their flight  
“ With such distempered hues and dimness chill  
“ As change the saddened eve from bright and warm,



“ Presaging floods with thunder. Blasts he brings  
“ Which shake the groves, and wither where they  
light.

“ He stoops upon the Tower of Bel: but still  
“ The Sun behind his head glows opposite,  
“ Eclipsed to him who called and me.

“ Amain,

“ Shook by his feet from off that smoking hill  
“ Clay-built, huge fragments rolled: a double chain  
“ Which reached the house-roofs under, and a sword  
“ Filled either grasp; then looking where we stood,  
“ He spake the language of my father's land.  
“ I must not utter here one holiest word—  
“ What else he said was thus: ‘ Both just and good  
“ ‘ Are all his thoughts!—above these worlds I stand  
“ ‘ To do his will!’ He ended, and the sound  
“ Like thunders lapsing till they pass away,  
“ Surceased far off. As loud the first replied:  
“ ‘ Haste thou!—it is His message—bind and slay—  
“ ‘ Her time is gone!’ Then swiftly toward the ground

“ He leaped whose hands were armed. I could not trace  
“ His path beneath me, though I wished and tried,  
“ Through that dun haze redoubled now—far round  
“ Earth, furnace-like, steamed upwards.

“ Next, aside

“ Toward him of late so near I turned my face,  
“ And saw his brightness fading through the trees,  
“ As sunset skies, far off: but in his place  
“ A mighty Palace stood with portals closed,  
“ —So lightly change our visions as they please,  
“ Exempt from wonder often too. Aloof  
“ I paused at first; and saw the living tide  
“ Which set so strong that way, nor chains nor bars  
“ Sustained the rushing influx—what opposed  
“ Was burst at once—crowds passed, and with them I.  
“ The walls were built of jasper, and the roof,  
“ Serene and distant, seemed another sky  
“ With clouds of incense floating: lamps like stars  
“ In number—suns in brightness—lit their fasts:  
“ A hundred pillars, and a hundred thrones

- “ I saw, with those that sat upon them. Stones  
“ Had life and human beauty—moulten beasts  
“ Had life, though iron or brass. Behind them fell  
“ Earth’s tribes, and worshipped — princes, captains,  
priests,  
“ The chief of every people bowed before :  
“ All kindreds toiled in praises to their own,  
“ All nations to their own—and all to Bel.  
“ Of graven gold above the rest he shone  
“ In giant stature eminent ; and wore  
“ A crown upon his head, with sparkling beams  
“ Set thick, like gems on fire. The pleasant smell  
“ Of nard and cassia filled his halls—in streams  
“ The wine flowed round his sacrifices. Most  
“ Enchained mine eyes, yet why I know not well,  
“ Vessels of divers forms—fair chalices,  
“ And cups with imitated flowers embost—  
“ Lamps, vases, censers, wrought in gold :—all these  
“ Seemed rare past human art or regal cost :  
“ Hence drank the guests admiringly. Their sports

- “ Grew louder round the altars—largely ran  
“ Both mirth and wine—Belshazzar mocked his foes ;  
“ A thousand princes feasted in his courts.  
“ From choirs unseen the distant strains began  
“ Of war o’erthrown and glory in repose—  
“ Scarce heard, or with suspended breath at first—  
“ So softly woke the lute, the harp, the lyre,  
“ And meek-toned dulcimer—so sweet and still  
“ To voices warbling in alternate song :  
“ Till as they floated onwards, nearer burst  
“ The mighty chorus round us—higher yet higher  
“ Midst horns and cymbals rang the clarions shrill—  
“ ‘ The Heavens are thine !—thou dost subdue the  
strong—  
“ ‘ Thou dost confound the impious while they rail—  
“ ‘ Almighty Bel !’—‘ The Earth is thine ! thy will  
“ ‘ Prevails o’er all beneath ! To thee we sing,  
“ ‘ O thou ! that scatterest armies with thy spear !  
“ ‘ This world belongs to thee—Belshazzar, hail !’—  
“ ‘ Ailona ! Queen ! the vacant throne stands here !

- “ ‘ Let envious Haza burn—Beari wail—  
“ ‘ Ailona ! Bride ! receive the gifts we bring—  
“ ‘ Virgin, arise, ascend !’—With that, the king  
“ Stretched forth his hand, and while the Temple shook  
“ With all its multitudes—so loud their cry  
“ ‘ Ailona ! Queen !’—he placed me where we sat  
“ In power like Gods, and in a house like Heaven !  
“ The nearest guests were crowned; but pale their look,  
“ Scornful, severe, with ghastly majesty,  
“ Methought like death—they moved, they spake, they  
ate—  
“ From those fair vessels wine to each was given,  
“ And this they drank, though dead. Named oft hard by  
“ First Nimrod armed, Semiramis, and Pul  
“ Below, with more between. The seats were full  
“ Save one—and that far off. My heart yet throbs—  
“ For lo ! again short change to misery !  
“ Their crimson vests and moonlike mitres fade—  
“ The music sounds no more—the guests look back—  
“ Those kings too gaze, but silently—and sobs

“ Suppressed I hear, with plaints from lips afraid.

“ Idols, so fair of late, grow swart and black :

“ Some, whence they stood before, leap down : mine  
eyes

“ Can scarce discern the image from its priest,

“ Thus life and death are mingled—dead things rise,

“ While living shrink to shadows as they fall !

“ Yea, pictured figures move upon the wall ;

“ Those vessels melt or vanish from the feast ;

“ Sighs mix with laughter, prayers with blasphemies,

“ And darkness fills the illimitable Hall.

“ I turned to speak—Belshazzar’s throne stood near,

“ But he the last of all those kings was seated,

“ As pale as they : I rose, and strove to stand,

“ The Temple floor heaved under me—in fear

“ I called for help—a hand was on my hand ;

“ Its pressure pains me still—and in mine ear

“ With hoarser tones Bel’s Prophetess repeated

“ Words which she learnt of me, and twice hath spoken—

“ ‘ Strike, Father, strike ! ’ ”

Groaning she ended here,  
To ease the o'er-freighted heart aloud once more,  
And hide her face declined upon her knees :  
Grief leaves its vessel whole, which else were broken,  
Exhaled in scalding sighs from raw remembrances.  
With silent lips, and eyes upon the floor,  
Her virgin followers dew their cheeks with tears,  
For young themselves and prone to love are these.  
That cautious Matron strives not with her fears  
Confronting mightier nature, but aloof  
From what she aims at, thus: " The peaceful rest,  
" Awhile perchance the wretched ; but the blest  
" Never, till bliss decays. A darker shade  
" Falls when the sun shines brightest—to the roof  
" An infant's image reaches, if his face  
" O'erlooks the hearth below. That hand which prest  
" So hard, was mine—my voice awoke thee, Maid !  
" Too happy for repose on such a place  
" Sits giddily aloft Belshazzar's Queen.  
" In sleep the extremes approach of joy and woe—

“ As hours engraved upon the dial, show

“ Its first and last—how near, with none between.”

Thus she ; in turn the Virgin’s lips reply :

“ Yet holiest wisdom speaks through dreams : we know

“ There are who can interpret sleep, and some

“ Prove perfect in its symbols—these descry

“ Death’s advent by his shadow, though unlike

“ The shape, seen far before. But things to come

“ Perchance are pictured plainer where the eye

“ Is weak and dim, as mine !” The Matron smiled,

Yet more it seemed in pity than disdain,

Then spake : “ If so, the knowledge were unwise,

“ Afflicting whom it could not help ; for who

“ Would flee, though warned, from shades—by fear  
beguiled—

“ To meet the ills he shunned so soon again,

“ Or hope that flight may hide him from the skies ?

“ He needs be swift indeed whom shades pursue !

“ That ancient sire so ill at ease last night,

“ Will read through tears the visions of his child,



“ And see their terrors darken as they rise,  
“ Grow great apace and multiply. His sight  
“ Foreran the dream, he prophesied of strife,  
“ The trump thou spakest of sounded at his word !  
“ So skilled a seer will prove his prescience right—  
“ Doth wisdom teach to hide us in the wild ;  
“ Or stand as watchmen on the tower of life,  
“ And look around for mischief and the sword ?”

Thus she, but long in vain—half grave, half gay,  
Mingling her mirth with wisdom—and the tale  
Of erring foresight with some lapse absurd  
Whence fear is plucked midst laughter—long in vain  
Ere chased by smiles those sorrows pass away,  
The breast grows calm, and youth’s fresh hopes prevail.  
Yet words so apt and kind can rarely fail !  
A charm is on her lips to lessen pain—  
The facile laugh—the hint ’twixt truth and play—  
Suggestions lightly urged and straight suppress,  
Which leave the listener’s scruples free again—  
Well-practised art to join the harmless jest

With looks of awe and earnestness. The Maid  
Had ever thought that truth was stern and plain—  
Hard and ungracious wisdom—till her guest  
Soothing with gentlest speech all doubts to rest,  
Had ruled the will she flattered and obeyed.



**THE IMPIOUS FEAST.**

**BOOK VIII.**



## THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

### BOOK VIII.

---

Who journeying when the days grow shorter, stops  
At sunset to review his path, with face  
Turned back from some steep eminence, may see  
The autumnal landscape chilled by mists, its plains  
All lost and hamlets hidden ; but yet the tops  
Of hills or city spires distinct—their base  
Alone confounded in that hazy sea  
Isle-strewn and white beneath him : Memory strains  
Her vision thus o'er human things, to trace  
Their past proportions through the veil which drops

Round realms and empires. Some have ceased to be  
Substance and shade—not even the name remains  
Of that which seemed so great when near—the rest  
Are, most part, ill-discerned—both age and place  
Unsettled on the chart of Time: a few  
Distinct, rise higher. Her bright and glorious crest  
Greece lifts above the twilight round her—free,  
With many a laureate wreath of art or war,  
And plumed by all the muses. Egypt's hue  
Is dark, her wrinkled visage sad, the scar  
Of patient servitude on neck and knee—  
A feeble giantess whose mystic vest  
Is lettered thick with beast, bird, fish, or star—  
The signs which none may read. Our dubious view  
Flits vaguely o'er a hundred near her—two  
Stand broad and large before us: Rome alone  
Fills the mid space pre-eminent—behind,  
Far off, with head as high, old Babylon.

Each was in turn the tyranness of mankind;  
One age by age to such dread stature grew,

Strengthening with time, long flourished, long declined ;  
A thousand years beheld her on the throne :  
The other stooped at once ; but yet her name  
Is that great mystery in which we find  
Power, lewdness, sorcery, malice, and the pride  
Of envious hate 'gainst Heaven : half rests unknown,  
All else is sin—we use it as the same  
With veiled uncleanness, knowledge misapplied,  
And atheist arrogance. Behold her climbed  
Where human hope on that unsteady height  
Must stop or fall—her monarch deified,  
Earth's riches all before her—Joy hath timed  
The hour, and summoned glory comes to-night.

Alone, above his guests, the king reclines :  
Belshazzar's palace halls are filled with light—  
For day ends early here. On steps upraised  
Are two coequal thrones—the right hand his,  
The left still void. An ivory table shines  
Rimmed with the sardine stone and chrysolite  
Set thick, between. One seat is void, where gazed



Till now, the thankful eye on Nitocris :  
She fills no second place, nor yet repines  
To yield the first. Beneath, but nearest this,  
Each with the regal circle on his brow,  
Maragdas, Aribœus, Artemas,  
And Sardian Croesus. Wives or concubines  
—Differing but little here, since queens forego  
Their ancient birth-right for the least, and pass  
Unblamed to greater honour—ranged in lines  
Of rival beauty press the seats below ;  
Beari first with Haza. Either side  
Hath sights, alas ! of cruelty and woe—  
Bareheaded kings and manacled with gold,  
But robed and seated royally.

So wide

Those palace halls, that many a glittering row  
Of Babylonian matrons purple-stoled,  
Extending rank by rank, with Judges old,  
Chiefs, Princes, Captains, Counsellors—the pride  
Of war or peace—Belshazzar's thousand Lords,

Flower-crowned, as fresh from victory, recline  
At large, with room to spare. Their sparkling boards  
Seem heaped to satiate luxury. The fair  
Of other lands, the young, the delicate  
In cups of crystal pour Damascan wine,  
And slave-like kneel presenting it—for there  
Beauty alone hath leave to worship state,  
Itself ennobled by its ministry.

With these, behold a presence from the sky !  
Full in the midst Bel's golden altars shine ;  
He rises o'er their cloudy frankincense—  
While Cathura, Arioch, Urr, Belsyphirine  
—Meet servants such for such a Deity—  
Surround the odious type of lust, and thence  
Deal out his blessings as they please, nor spare  
God's holiest attributes. Impute not, Lord !  
—Since one alone is good, and only thine  
Wherever else ascribed or claimed, they are—  
This distant echo of their blasphemies,  
Impute it not as sin ! while lips abhorred

Call him supreme, almighty, righteous, wise,  
We learn the more to fear thee !

In their halls

Midway stands Bel, Belshazzar's guest—aloft,  
Part armed, the rest in effigies of peace,  
Long lines appear of kings on marble walls  
And sculptured cornices. There Nimrod oft  
Rekurs throughout with star above his head ;  
That mighty hunter named by fabling Greece  
Orion since. Next Belus crowned with rays  
Through clouds his chariot guiding. On a bed  
Reclines Semiramis—around her plays  
The fluttering dove—in level plain outspread  
Her left hand bears up Nineveh—her right,  
Where turns with smiles of love the harlot's gaze,  
Far mightier Babylon. In chains are led  
His captives who surpasses these, the third  
And last great founder : more than both in might  
He holds the builder's compasses and fills  
A plain with towers. But he whose works they are

Forbore to time him grazing with the herd  
Driven out from men, or fleeing toward the hills  
Far off for shelter from his kind.

On high

Midst lamps distinct shine these, while choirs are heard  
Alternate sweet and strong: the cooler air  
Wafts fragrance from Bel's altar: lightly thrills  
The heart prepared for love by melody,  
Secure awhile through reverence from excess  
In these yet early hours—alike from care  
Remote, and flushed intemperance. Early yet  
The hours, and one throne still stands vacant—kings  
Learn patience here till priests consent to bless—  
Some happier star must rise, or envious set;  
Misfortune rides upon the dragon's wings;  
Wait till Astarte climb the roof above  
And draw its feeble shadows less and less,  
Then ere she turn them, bring the Bride—there is  
A time when malice may not reach to love,  
Now all things dread their opposites! The net

Is round her feet—unhappy virgin press  
More close both ears and eyes ! pride bids thee come,  
And glory points the downward path toward bliss :  
Within, she hears repinings of distress—  
A nearer cry forbids her to forget !  
Henceforth farewell the charities of home—  
A dreadful pause 'twixt peace and grandeur this !  
She could endure it best where tears may fall  
Unseen, sighs pass uninterrupted, where  
The heart breathes freest—in solitude.

That Sire

Abhors the threshold of his ancient hall,  
Though purple hangings veil its rafters bare,  
And lamps of silver burn with scented fire.  
Tent-like, within o'ercanopied, the space  
Disposed for luxury—both floor and wall  
Unseen : but ill-contrived if meant to please,  
Since change itself affrights him thus. Some snare  
Perchance is hidden beneath the playful grace  
Of those young forms around her—and he sees

Ambiguous meanings in the matron's face,  
Most when she smiles. " Oil-like her speeches are,  
" Polluting that clear stream whose waters shone  
" With health, before, and purity ! Why these ?  
" Are Gentile women wiser than our own ?  
" The fruit is ever as the seed !" Severe,  
His words dishearten duty, and distrust  
So vain, makes caution profitless, if fear  
Should seek its guidance else.

But now alone—

The last time solitary now—since eve  
She sits for whom he trembles thus : it is  
The hour that pride grows meek and anger just,  
When they which love must part—nor would she leave  
To alien eyes unveiled its sanctities.  
Great change, indeed, and reconciled with pain—  
A mournful hour at best ! But while he strays  
The moon-lit court she visits, and again  
Beholds her seat of stone beside the well  
Where childhood wondering saw with downward gaze

Bright stars beneath the waters dark, as plain  
As those in Heaven above. All worthless things  
Grow precious when we turn to bid farewell—  
Here were her sports in infancy. The grove  
Guarded and filled with lights—where still in vain  
Through pine or cedar beats its restless wings  
Aloft from branch to branch the fearful dove,  
Yet finds no safer hiding place—outspreads  
With dusky foliage o'er her as of old,  
But now, it seems, reproachfully. They lie  
Henceforth neglected in their narrow beds,  
Whose widest error was excess of love,  
Pure but extreme, beneath the sacred mould  
Her hands had gemmed with springs first buds! Her  
eye  
Is toward the gate, and whom she waits, behold!  
No partner in that tenderness which sheds  
O'er sorrow smiles till anguish change or cease—  
Nor singly, as she hoped. Abruptly treads  
The Sire, like one whom some great thought might keep

Irresolute at first beset with fears—

But now by force burst through again. Not peace

With love more mild at parting, calm and deep,

He brings—but gestures fierce, distempered looks,

Impatient urgency, the pride which hears

Defiance in a pause like doubt, and brooks

Delay as ill as scorn. Beside him one

Who never missed her welcome till to-night,

Though no unfrequent visitant, appears

With visage pale cast down : in Babylon

A prince, yet little envied ; swift to seek

The poor, and strong to shelter from despite

The just oppressed—a brother with the meek ;

Here Judah's trust, and Sabra's proselyte ;

Toward him, 'bove all, observant as a son.

“ Arise, and let us hence ! ”—with glowing cheek

Distempered by ill fears, thus first the Sire—

“ Haste we from that foul Sorceress, child ! from Bel,

“ Belshazzar, Babylon. They tarried not

“ Who burnt the cities whence they came with fire,



“ And all that impious plain o’erthrew—but urged  
“ With threats their lingering host, accepted Lot—  
“ “ Escape ye to the mountains—turn not back—  
“ “ It is for life ! ’—then God’s fierce anger fell  
“ On one who looked behind her. He hath purged  
“ With flames the filth of that accursed land,  
“ And left it void for ever ! Sins as black  
“ Are round us here Ailona—where we dwell  
“ Is judged like these—the ground on which we stand  
“ Accursed of God as bloody and defiled,  
“ And shall be desolate : this city too  
“ He will destroy—the league she made with Hell  
“ Avails no more—it is for life !—O child,  
“ Away ! nor look behind, lest wrath pursue  
“ Consuming them that tarry ! ”

He little knew

—So pure of heart the Sire—that cries may warn  
Till those who hear discern them not. There is  
A voice as loud which calls untired to us  
At noon, at eve, at sunset, midnight, morn—

“ Watch till I come !—the hour, perchance, is this,  
“ Beyond which none can work !” To us it calls  
As loud, but who regards ? The happy thus  
Leaps lightly forth—the wretched and forlorn  
Seeks shelter in a world which laughs at him—  
From crowd to crowd the crippled Elder crawls ;  
Wherever fools frequent his watery eye  
Is seen, his slavered lip, and palsied limb  
Dragged on in life’s dull chase of vanity.

With grief she heard, not fear : such floods of zeal  
Were less unfrequent late—the sight grown dim  
Changed all it saw to prodigies. Thus far  
Her heart condemned her not. Why call it sin  
To feel as human breasts in youth must feel ?  
The voice which led seemed Destiny’s—the star  
Toward which she went so fast, shone fixed, and lighted  
No path but this. If hope swelled high within,  
What marvel was it here ? Bland words prevail,  
And smiles of broad-eyed wonder in a war  
’Gainst scrupulous starts like these : some playful tale

Disarmed the giant brood of dreams affrighted,  
And cut suspicion short.

Her words begin

Low-toned as fearful to offend, submiss

But little credulous of what he said.

“ Are all alike so wretched then ?—is this

“ The threshold of that gate where hopes are cast ?

“ Or are we marked to eat the bitter bread

“ Of helpless poverty alone—to crave

“ No better for the present than the past—

“ To trust no certainty but death—to tread

“ The same dull road contented toward the grave ?

“ Is such the fruit which faith must pluck at last

“ From penitential love of God ? His dread

“ Pursued us forth, nor leaves us where it drave :

“ We and our fathers speed alike !”

She spake,

And more, perchance, had followed, but his ears

Endured not till its end. “ O wise !”—he cried—

“ O subtly taught to laugh at other’s fears,

“ And doubt if God be just or not ! Awake,  
“ Ye ignorant aged—behold at last a guide !  
“ His sabbaths were despised ; that feast ordained  
“ When Israel fled, and in one night he slew  
“ The first-born males of Egypt—solemn days  
“ Of prayer and thankfulness were all profaned,  
“ And murderers left to serve him. Idol praise  
“ Was noisy in his courts—on altars new  
“ Were idol sacrifices. Israel weighed  
“ The gold of Ophir for a God, and learnt  
“ To watch the lying lips of Prophets feigned,  
“ Agape for oracles. His Priests beheld  
“ The abominations which their hands had made  
“ In Dan and Bethel unabashed : they felled  
“ The oak, or from its mountains brought the pine,  
“ Whence part was made an image, part was burnt,  
“ Even as they would, with fire. Witchcrafts, sorceries,  
“ Unnatural vigils, orgies mad with wine  
“ Inflamed adulterous Judah. Nor were these  
“ On Lebanon retired midst groves obscene,

“ By stream or valley—under rocks or trees—  
“ As if their cursed defilements shamed the land—  
“ But near *his* Temple porch their lusts were seen  
“ Whose ways thou callest unequal! Yet are we  
“ So stedfast in his love; or should have been  
“ Through faith so perfect—mingling as we must  
“ With leperous millions on life’s crowded strand—  
“ As still to move aloof, and wander free  
“ Untouched, untainted, spotless of the dust  
“ Which blinded them—left space enough between  
“ Our guilty brethren and ourselves? That hand,  
“ Unsparing as it seemed, was more than just—  
“ It plucked us out to save us.”

Loud in zeal

The fervent Sire; and Astath ere he ceased,  
With haste as eager but more mild began.  
“ Thou hast no better choice than this—to kneel  
“ Where brutes are worshipped Gods, and kings deceased  
“ Are honoured as immortals—man by man!  
“ The dead by those who live!—no choice but this,

“ Or flight with us, Ailona.” Urgent they,  
Like passers by, whose dreadful task it is  
To warn the deaf of danger—ill believed  
Both cries and signs, threats mocked, prayers cast  
away.

In turn she spake, but less amazed than grieved:  
“ Escape! from what? Belshazzar’s wrath?—Alas!  
“ We should find wings for that! Some deep abyss  
“ Must hold and hide us trembling from the day,  
“ Beyond where human eye hath reached! Our hands  
“ Are weak to break the doors of triple brass—  
“ Where should we flee?”—“ God hath not mocked me  
thus,

“ Nor thus far left me destitute,” replied  
The impatient Sire, “ He will find safer lands,  
“ Where faith in him may tarry: we shall pass,  
“ Though weak, the doors which Astath keeps for us:  
“ Nor lacks he means, nor is his help denied.  
“ At least, may we be ready! Where he stands

“ Is Death, who watches closely if he slide ;  
“ Yet, for our sakes, he fears not Death. The gate  
“ Will open when he bids to let us out—  
“ His servants guard us here—his chariots wait—  
“ And Cyrus still is in the plain. Decide !  
“ Should evil intercept us, not through doubt  
“ We perish, faithless 'gainst our souls—it is  
“ From Him whose thoughts are wise, whose paths are  
    straight,  
“ Who judges best in all things else, and this.  
“ But charge not thou, if mischief follow pride,  
“ The plague of stubborn sin on chance or fate :  
“ Child !—mark me—thou art warned !”

He spake ; the Maid

Looked round irresolute and sore beset ;  
Nor saw she where reluctant will might hide  
Secure midst specious subterfuges—yet  
To meet the rashness of his wrath afraid ;  
But worse prepared to yield. Before her face

Ashamed she sees a holier sacrifice ;  
Self-offered honour and a name so great ;  
That God be not despoiled, nor she betrayed  
Who hazards all in this pernicious race  
Where loss is death—the fortunate, the wise  
For her sake offered ! But is faith indeed  
So pure, or love thus sanctified ?—no trace  
Of earth or human passion mixed to shade  
Its broad and lucid singleness, whence dies  
Untouched connatural fondness as a weed  
Too gross for that celestial soil ?—’Twere hard,  
A daily guest so long, with careless eyes,  
Or tranced in holier visions, to regard  
Beauty so absolute as hers, and feed  
Their sight content and passionless apart  
On grace so innocent ! There is a time  
When love seems clear of love’s infirmities—  
Unmanacled from tyrant sense, sublime,  
Throned rather in the spirit than the heart,  
But lord alike of both. Some hallowed page,



His daily lesson, sounded from her tongue,  
Of grace conferred, or chastisement delayed,  
Wrath, comfort, warning, mercy—which the Sage  
Resolved interpreting:—some ancient rhyme  
Seemed more than earthly music in her song—  
And prayer for peace was answered while she prayed.

With all thoughts fair or sacred mixed the Maid,  
Beloved till now like one of happier kind  
Scarce consciously—apart from maddening fear  
Or jealous hope—those goads on either side  
Which make so many miserable. He saw  
That, honour'd as he was, the lowliest hind—  
The least and last of Judah—might appear  
Where he of seed corrupt, unsanctified,  
Alien in nature, lineage, heirship, law,  
A stranger proselyte—might not. Awhile  
He watched some token of a will resigned,  
Then answering silence—thus: “ Shall faith then fail;  
“ Or false allurements draw thee from a Guide  
“ Like this, Ailona? Wretched! if through guile,

“ And listening freely to the muttered hail  
“ Of witchcraft thus forewarned, we feast with Bel,  
“ No violent threat compulsive !” Shame calls pride,  
Hard pressed by truth—pride, anger to its aid.  
“ He fears lest faith should falter or rebel  
“ Who leaves his master’s gate unclosed,” she said ;  
“ Both flies and counsels flight—looks back to chide,  
“ Then quits, for hostile lords, his own betrayed !”

If thou whose thoughts are fettered by my tale  
Shouldest yield thine heart to hatred, and the pest  
—Yet God preserve from this !—grown sovereign there,  
Should war with weaker mercy, and prevail :  
Till that pure Spirit whose temple is the breast  
Made clean from wrath, and sanctified by prayer,  
For ever leave the unwholesome place unblest—  
Abhor thee and forsake thee—spare to rail,  
To threat, deride, defy, contemn, or dare,  
Hate hath a loftier aim, a curse less loud were best.

Wish that he love, as some have loved, though few,  
Till passion climb toward madness—that long years

May pass away midst doubts, convictions, fears,  
Dreams rarely false in all things—never true—  
That words of hope may fill his credulous ears,  
That guileless counsel urge him to pursue,  
That love may work with pity. Let him gaze  
—No casual guest, but daily through his tears—  
If sickness cloud the sight, or grief the hue,  
Since thus weak hearts grow weakest. While he strays  
Unconscious still of misery at his side,  
Drive forth his visions, bid him wake and view  
The backward movements of suggested pride—  
Eyes, once so mild, with hatred in their rays,  
Those cheeks, before so pale, with anger dyed,  
And scorn on lips where late his transports grew.

Cruel the wish which falters in my verse—  
I would not feel who teach it ! Pain must cease  
In health or death, and death may lead to rest ;  
Repentant guilt is sheltered from its curse ;  
Toil hath its end in ease, and care in peace—  
Want shall be filled at last ; the meek who mourn are  
blest !

He shall have need of tears, yet blush to weep :  
His noonday thoughts ride hard the heart oppress ;  
And shame grow great as strength and pride decrease :  
He shall feel loath to watch, to sleep afraid—  
For damned suggestions haunt distempered sleep ;  
And, sick with weariness, his dreams might show  
Some base intruder grinning from his gate ;  
His home usurped, and in the walks he made  
—Where still on banks he raised his roses blow—  
The thrifty slave, long taught to fawn and wait,  
Triumphant now and owner of their shade—  
Her whom he fears to love, with him he scorns to hate.

Not thus he felt who never hoped, but woe  
Was in his heart already, and stings like these—  
Ill gibes from cruel lips—pierced deep. “ I might  
forego

“ What many covet most,” he answered ; “ ease,  
“ Abundance, honour—nor repine : nay more,  
“ I could leave scorn behind me, and a name  
“ Marked out for curses where my father’s grave

“ Reminds the passer by. For God, who sees  
“ Our thoughts within their fountain, and before  
“ They issue foul or pure—shall praise or blame  
“ As each hereafter merits. If I crave  
“ Ought for myself beyond, he knows it—he  
“ Knows if I seek his honour, and would save  
“ For him, his worshipper. In that clear sight,  
“ Where all things as they are and were must be—  
“ Love other than his own, if mixed with his,  
“ May seem like sin. We yet shall meet to-night—  
“ Again Earth’s Empress may rebuke her slave—  
“ But had the chidden traitor sought to flee  
“ He might have found a fairer time than this !”  
Thus said, he tarried not reply. The Sire  
Gave larger room for anger, as from wrong  
Extreme, disclaiming recompense : in ire  
He rent his robe, then spake : “ That serpent tongue,  
“ Before so still, hath learnt at last to hiss !  
“ Accursed be they that taught it !” While the tide  
Of wrath ran high, his stormy spirit moved

Afloat from wave to wave unwrecked above—  
But struck and perished when it fell. The Maid,  
As one whom loud reproach had fortified,  
Endured more stubborn while he raved—her love,  
For in the eclipse of duty still she loved,  
Was weak against his grief.

“ ’Twere much,” he said,

“ To see thee perish quite, and fallen from truth

“ Apostate bring God’s judgments on thine head—

“ The penal curse for ever ! Child, we warred

“ Till now with other cares than these, and youth

“ Had better hopes. What makes thine heart so  
hard ? •

“ There once was love between us—toward the dead

“ Honour there was and pity. We abide

“ The last of many on the earth—our name

“ Was blameless till to-night—now faith is marred—

“ We halt ’twixt God and Baal !” Again she sighed,

Moved rather by his sorrows than his fears,

Till the couch rocked beneath her. “ Ere thou blame

“ Wait till to-morrow, Father ! grant me this—

“ If faithless—let men curse me—loath me thou—

“ Would that my heart were harder than it is,

“ Or that I did not see thee lose these tears !

“ Why should we cease to love ? ” — “ God send thee  
grace

“ To hear my prayers ! ” he said, and knelt beside :

“ Except toward Him I never prayed till now ! ”

Then pausing, gazed upon the Virgin's face,

Pale as if death had touched it in its pride

Ashamed to harm. The sight was closed, the brow

Encircled with the garland of a bride :

Long years had vanished from that look ! the place

In which she lay was where her Mother died..

So much the same she seemed, that Sabra's eyes

Glanced back for him who suffered there before :

Intent he gazed, then spake : “ For their sakes rise

“ Who will require thee of me. I have been

“ Rash and ungentle, Child, but not unkind—

“ Must love thus perish—shall we meet no more ?

“ Would God that thou couldst see what I have seen,  
“ And learn, at last, to pity !”

On her cheek

She felt his tears—her heart perchance inclined,  
But still those breathless lips forbore to speak.  
“ Thou wilt not change, and leave me, Daughter ?” thus  
Again he cried, “ It is for her that bore—  
“ So meek and gracious as she was !—and not  
“ For one whom malice taught thee how to hate.  
“ Still wider grow divided souls—’twixt us  
“ With charms and spells that impious fiend has thrust ;  
“ The cord is loosed, love perished, faith forgot—  
“ Peace never can return again !—Too late,  
“ Were vows renewed, it is for such to trust.”

Alas ! too late, indeed ! Belshazzar’s Bride,  
Arise ! his trumpets shake the guarded gate ;  
With hymns and flowers the virgins stand beside !  
Both started from their place—the Child and Sire—  
A thought of sin arose, a dream of wrath,  
A shade begot ’twixt misery and ire—



Then passed as swift away. To see her die—  
Himself to press the struggling spirit forth—  
Seemed more endurable than this! His eye  
Was evil toward the virgins and their guide.  
“Ye have made haste—and prospered in your speed—  
“Behold the victim! bear the knife and fire!  
“It is an hour for Hell to laugh,” he cried,  
“Hell hath prepared the soil, and ye the seed:  
“God grant that all who reap may find as I!  
“She did despise my tears—unnatural Maid!  
“When thou shalt kneel, may God refuse to hear—  
“Or hearing thee, remember why I prayed,  
“And how, at last, was answered! Grief and shame  
“Pursue thee, watch beside thee, run before—  
“And late repentance load thine heart with dread!  
“May none who ever loved thee touch thy bier—  
“But strangers dig thy grave—thy bridal bed  
“Be with the worm in darkness, and thy name—  
“Accursed amongst our tribes—be heard no more!”  
Till then she might have hoped for happier days;

With larger means to soothe the couch of age—  
Since youth had slept so hard—her holiest care  
Hereafter, through life's shadows and decays,  
To watch, to comfort, nourish, or assuage:  
Here hope looks far along a shoreless main—  
What is to-morrow's promise every where!  
His curse confounds—she neither kneels nor prays—  
The trembling virgins hurry from his rage—  
That court is passed which none will tread again!

Awhile the wretched man sat down; his face  
Declined was hidden in his hands. A strain  
Of love, of glory, of that godlike race  
Which rose and ends in Heaven, he hears ascending—  
Sweet voices when the intermitted clang  
Of drums or cymbals drown them not. In vain  
He would subdue those throbs which shake the place,  
And listening to the bridal hymns they sang,  
Approve his curse—remorse with wrath contending—  
But feebler nature ill sustained his hate,  
Nor will love's growth of years at once decay:—

Their songs have ceased at last, or passed away ;  
The grove again is silent round his gate.  
Such calm seems dreadful to him now—he lifts  
His eyes and marks the couch on which she lay,  
Her lute beside the veil she wore so late,  
With written emblems treasured as her gifts—  
The sacred toils of many a peaceful day !  
Then words midst groans burst forth—“ It is thy will !  
“ Teach me to suffer—hold mine heart from sin—  
“ Be patient yet ! I know not how to pray—  
“ But still confess that thou art righteous still.  
“ Thine eyes, which see my terrors, search within—  
“ Thou knowest, Lord, that I love thee !”

From his seat

In haste uprisen, he stops not on the sill.  
Some lamps remain without unquenched, and wave  
Their restless radiance o’er the dewy sward  
Flower strewn—no sounds but echoes of his feet  
Are heard, nor those beyond the pavement. Hard  
His red eye fixes where those cressets burn,

And rests a moment on his Brother's grave.

Loud swings the gate behind him—" Let it beat !

" Henceforth"—he says—" who will may lock and  
guard—

" That care is passed—I never shall return !"



# THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

## BOOK IX.

---

THE Feast suspends its revelry—be still,  
Ye flattering choirs! she enters in whose praise  
Your hymns though strong to charm, must waste their  
skill—

Some prescient terror mingles with their power:  
How many hearts throb now—yet throb unblest!  
Better the sudden pause—the breathless gaze—  
The dubious awe which wait her from the sill:  
Chaldæan harlot, dangerous is thy guest!  
Behold, her jewelled head provokes the shower

Darkening with curses o'er thee!—She shall rest  
No more! hate dims the crown which she must wear—  
Belshazzar's Queen and new-espoused—her days  
Decline not, set not, but stop short—despair  
Calls to the nuptial feast, and misery pays the dower!

With eyes cast down she passes from the door;  
Long lines of princely virgins walk before,  
Chaldæa's boast unveiled with braided hair—  
Beauty hath yet its triumphs for an hour—  
These first—Earth's loftiest matrons follow. Fair  
Are they who scatter roses on the floor,  
Admired, a moment praised, but straight forgot—  
For parsimonious nature seldom mingles  
The richest of her gifts—surveys her store  
Of happy forms, choice hues, proportions rare—  
Combining all she has without a blot,  
And showering grace o'er harmony—or singles  
One face from many millions by her care  
For undisputed sovereignty as here:  
Ailona feels—what heart so pure feels not?—

Love's homage with flushed cheek cast down ; a tear  
Bedews its rosy bashfulness, revealing  
Some thought of fire which neither hope can soothe,  
Nor glory quench, nor flattery charm from fear—  
'Gainst ill-suggesting pride to faith appealing,  
And grieved remembrance still forced back by truth.

Once seen, all eyes rest on her ; every knee  
Bows down ; Belshazzar meets her from his place  
And leads her whence he came ; on high they sit  
Above their guests—a joyful Bridegroom he,  
In life's ascension still, nor far from youth :  
Gems sparkle midst the flowers which shade her face  
Upraised at length—those well might worship it  
Who feared the marble shapes their hands had wrought  
Imputing strength to beauty. “ Blessed are ye !  
“ Yourself as Gods have power to bless ! ” they cry ;  
“ The eternal natures mingle with our race ;  
“ Bel sends on earth a daughter from the sky—  
“ Gods too are ye ! ”—But once, and that but late,  
Sounds such as these had reached her ears—she thought



Plebeian frenzy bellowed at the gate  
—So they whom Lot escaped, the mad and blind—  
What all within would loath as blasphemy :  
Nor knew that wiser hearts or lips dare lie  
Thus far—and men give worship to mankind.  
Now first on idols rests the Virgin's eye ;  
Bel's image in the midst glows opposite :  
Of gold itself, round both its legs are twined  
Two golden asps that o'er the hips unite.  
An altar smokes beneath its nostrils, piled  
With aromatic barks and gums :—beside  
That huge abomination stands a sight  
Almost as odious to the twice beguiled,  
Urr, Assur-baladan, Belsypphirine,  
Rabphalga, Pul—but first in state and pride,  
With dove-surmounted coronet, and rod  
Outstretched, the red-robed Cathura : his sign  
Controls their choirs ; he pours the oil and wine ;  
Both priests and guests are governed by his nod—  
Religion beckoning mirth to lust !—The Bride

But little knew till now that neither shades  
Conceal in grove or thicket—nor fanes confine  
Chaldæa's shame—that here it scorns to hide :  
Midst palace halls the priest sets up his God,  
And royal chambers have their lamp and shrine—  
Joy, Grief, Life, Death—the imperious pest invades—  
The couch, the tomb—wherever men abide.

Alas ! that she should learn so soon !—Afraid  
To think that others hate, Beari's scowl  
And Haza's envious gaze afflict the Maid.  
With forehead lowered to hide her tears, she eats  
Unconscious what or whence—she sips the bowl  
Nor knows that kings present it. From their seats  
The guests stand up ; with incense in their hands  
Both Cathura and his priests draw near : she sees  
The censers smoking as of late to Bel,  
The sacred millet strewn, the golden wands  
Held out toward her, and princes on their knees—  
Remorse interprets 'twixt the heart and ear—

“ Hail, goddess, midst Chaldæa’s deities !

“ Hail, idol, added to the hosts of Hell !”

There is a power scarce named more strong than fear—  
Yet fear makes part of it—shame—reverence—awe—  
The spirit of multitudes above our own—  
Seated in watchful eyes its shapes appear,  
Shapes diverse, feeble—each despised alone,  
But joined, as here, omnipotent. Its law,  
Mightiest no doubt in youth, lasts all life long ;  
Death has seemed less or easier—for the young  
Have sometimes died in keeping it—God’s wrath  
Provoked—remorse with self-contempt—the pain  
Of years forefelt—whatever conscience hath  
Condemned in vain to hide, or reproduced in vain.

A hundred priests kneel down before her feet ;  
Myrrh, cassia, spikenard, scatter they ; with eyes  
Abased they worship—“ Bel subdues the strong !  
“ His servants knew thee, Virgin, in the street !  
“ Belshazzar is his image here—our cries

“ When right availed not, mounted to his seat—

“ He hath reclaimed his own, ye choirs begin the song !”

SEMICHORUS.

Thy voice hath reached beyond the mountains, Bel !

The shadows hear thee—Earth and Ocean rest :

This is thy throne : O ! tarry while we tell

Thy power when rebel kings defied and fell—

Thy glory—ever blessing—ever blest !

SEMICHORUS.

Art thou not proudest when thou passest on

And captive darkness gasps before thy car ?

Art thou not happiest when thy dazzling zone

Throwing round Earth—almighty and alone—

Above the stars thou laughest from afar ?

CHORUS.

Chaldæa's God ! with mighty joy rejoice,

Father of Earth and Heaven—O Bel ! arise !

Awake the slumberer—nations lift your voice !

The Virgin Spouse awaits with downcast eyes.

## SEMICHORUS.

Vast are thy temples, radiant Lord ! and vast  
The gates, the towers, the ramparts stretched around—  
So high, that faintly breathes the trumpet's blast—  
So long, the thundering steeds advancing fast  
Seem without colour, motion, shape, or sound !

## SEMICHORUS.

Look for those armies now—thou sawest their pride—  
Is this the mighty plain they covered o'er ?  
Thus do they lie, who triumphed and defied,  
Like trodden fruits and chaplets that have died  
Midst revelry the many-tinctured floor ?

## CHORUS.

O Bel ! so spent—so abject is the great  
Before thy face—thy holiest walls before !  
Teach us, O Bel ! to humble him we hate—  
Him who can save, O teach us to adore !

Loud voices fill their strain ; the broad roofs ring  
Smit by its symphony—nor yet subside

The giddy thoughts it stirs—with hands spread wide  
And eyes upturned, again the arch-mischief prays.  
“ First, to the Gods be glory !—to the King  
“ Fear, adoration, empire, length of days  
“ In righteous peace !—their blessings to the Bride—  
“ Wealth, youth, unfading beauty, fruitful love,  
“ And cloudless years upon the earth—above  
“ A happier throne—a crown of brighter rays  
“ Full in Bel’s presence, next his couch assigned !  
“ Belshazzar is his image, she his pride ;  
“ In Earth and Heaven the Serpent weds the Dove !  
“ For us it is enough of bliss to gaze—  
“ Before her kneel the patrons of mankind,  
“ She kneels before the Gods !”—“ She honours thee !”  
“ All Babel’s kings have worshipped thee !” replied,  
So taught, his fellows when he ceased—“ In chains  
“ Earth’s rebel princes, brought from sea to sea,  
“ Have bowed their heads uncrowned before thy fanes !  
“ They saw the Gods they trusted at thy side !  
“ To Bel, the holiest, glory !”

On his feet,

As one who waits in haste, Belshazzar rose,  
With hand outstretched impatient toward the seat  
Where tarried still aghast the breathless Maid :  
Her eyes were fixed on his—the last night's snows  
Are scarce more coldly coloured than her cheek :  
Voiceless she sat, bewildered and afraid,  
With lips which spake not yet essayed to speak.  
At length, 'twixt love and shame, Earth's Monarch thus :  
“ Why looks Ailona doubtfully?—the Sire  
“ Who gives his infant children light and bread—  
“ Supreme, almighty, gracious to the meek,  
“ Asks love of all—and is a God to us :  
“ At morn his winged steeds are yoked with fire—  
“ Their breath it was which hung above the west  
“ In crimson clouds through fields of azure spread—  
“ To-night we feast—and lo ! he comes a guest !”  
Thus he ; aloud the feasted concourse said :  
“ To Bel, the holiest, glory !” Again in vain  
They called—she kneels indeed, yet not toward him,

That two-formed idol—but the king: his brow  
Seems darker than it was, the lamps burn dim  
Around—the roofs rock over her—through pain  
Her throat has lost its utterance—“ If I bow—”  
Is all she says—the pillars seem to reel—  
Nor can she add what curse. “ O lost! quite lost!  
“ Flee swift toward shame—be sure to perish thou!  
“ Behold those whispering Queens—that treacherous  
Priest!

“ ’Tis wise to sit and eat, yet scorn to kneel!  
“ They point the finger who abhor thee most—  
“ Both laugh—both triumph o’er the blasted feast!”  
Thus Mirria at her ear: but bolder now,  
“ Came she within for this?” the Pontiff cries;  
“ Are these Belshazzar’s banquets?—Cursed is he  
“ Who tastes the wine yet scorns the sacrifice!  
“ Till every head stoop down, and every knee—  
“ Ye princes hence! let all who fear Bel rise!”

As some poor bird whose wild notes filled the air,  
Hid midst her native brake on heath or lea—



Content to spend their warbled sweetness there,  
Far from mankind, and happy with the free :  
Till lured by cunning wiles she quits her tree,  
Soon caught, and closely caged—a hapless thrall !  
If chance the frenzied flutterings of despair  
Should loose her bars, more wretched still is she.  
Crowds lift their hands and chase her through the hall—  
She cannot rest, she knows not where to flee ;  
Her bruised wing beats the roof, and skims the stair,  
Through fire she hastes, 'gainst pillar, door, and wall,  
Then sinks at last where most she dreads to be.

Meek Child of captive Israel ! bid them rave !  
Be strong—nor fear to die !—despise their call !—  
Alas too late !—the affrighted spirit fails—  
Look once behind thee ! God is strong to save—  
In vain ! henceforth thou hast no God—the chase  
Is ended now—she falls, and Bel prevails !  
Down at the altar sinks she, down she bows  
Her head at length before the idol's face !  
—O that the pavement where she kneels had rent

One moment ere she touched it!—that a grave  
Had gaped and closed where stoop those jewelled brows!  
Idolatress—apostate—of her race  
First shame, and last!—farewell the heart's content  
Henceforth—the spirit's thankfulness—the ease  
Of guiltless thoughts, glad hopes, and patience blest  
Peace comes to all that seek it on their knees,  
And all that ask in faith are sure of grace—  
She must not hope—she cannot find a place  
In which to hide her fears or be at rest:  
Peace never shall return again! Farewell  
The silent house, dim court, and fragrant grove!  
Jehovah's curse is burning in her breast—  
Before her eyes behold the bulk of Bel!  
There is who will judge righteously—his hour  
Draws near at last to question, and reprove  
Those haughty thoughts through which, though warned,  
    she fell:  
He sees her wanderings—he can witness best  
If craft seduced her heart from truth—if power

Subdued—or flattery turned aside—or love  
Conspired with fear to aid the snares of Hell !

Enthroned again the King and Bride recline ;  
Obstructed mirth surmounts its hindrances  
To flow more largely midst their guests :—his art  
The baffled Priest recalls and warms with wine ;  
Then toward the ivory table where they sit  
In proverbs lifts his voice and gravely says :  
“ Tears mock consent ; to yield and yet repine  
“ Shows less of will than fear—the struggling heart  
“ Which heaves so high because it must submit,  
“ Is proud, rebellious, hard ! Bel loves not those  
“ That eye ill-pleased his altars—pale with care—  
“ Constrained as thou—and eager to depart ;  
“ A froward spirit our downcast looks disclose ;  
“ The dubious giver mars the gifts conferred ;  
“ Cold guests make sad the banquet ; and the prayer  
“ Which flies unwillingly ascends unheard.  
“ Reluctant service suits an angry God—  
“ The God of Israel !—well might sorrow bring

" Its daily tears for sacrifices—well

" Love flee from him whose sceptre was a rod

" Outstretched to bruise his people!—Whom the king

" Vouchsafes to worship—and he worships Bel—

" Thou too, his Bride, shouldest honour."

Ere the pride

Of that oracular tongue had ceased to ring,

Contending, as it seemed, for Bel—replied

A voice beyond yet louder—" Hearst thou this

" Belshazzar thus forbearing?—Is she placed

" Where slaves thrice sold may stand aloof to hiss

" And mock her tears?—Behold the double-faced !

" How well his wishes travel with his word !

" Speak—bid me rise—and by his Gods the sword

" Shall spare not for their altars !" He it is

That calls—in whom thoughts—passions—hid for years

So smothered that they seemed extinct, if known

As having been—now kindled by the scoff

'Gainst God, and what was innocence betrayed,

Flame madly forth—Love shakes unkindness off—

On Astath's brow no festal wreath appears :  
His eye expects its signal from the throne ;  
His eager hand is busy with its blade ;  
The injurious words still beat upon his ears—  
His voice is in the halls—and his alone.

“ She hath gone far already ! she hath cleft  
“ The heart of age for loving her too much—  
“ Despised the law which threatens worse than death,  
“ And worshipped Bel, thou bidding—she hath left  
“ Companions—kindred—nature ! These, and such,  
“ Have none to leave or love—they give their breath  
“ As gold held out may quicken zeal—incense  
“ The mighty, shame the feeble, rob the poor,  
“ Exacting bread from misery : ere they dine  
“ Some lamb must bleed : fumed strong with frankin-  
cense  
“ Their brodered garments sweep the marble floor :  
“ Mercy itself must tarry for their sign—  
“ The Gods are angry if their servants are :  
“ They love the altar for its myrrh and wine,

“ And stand to welcome gifts beside the door,  
“ But spurn the wretch who cannot pay for prayer.”

Ere yet the spring returns, and light divides  
No equal hours with darkness—while the day  
Spans with brief arch depressed the encumbered sky—  
Ere builds the clamorous rook, or buds the spray—  
When near and swift the drizzling tempest rides  
’Twixt earth and that diminished lamp on high—  
Hard lies its weight upon the paler sides  
Of verdant pines oppressed, or larches gray ;  
So long inclined that he who sees them sway  
Might almost doubt their rising—till subsides  
The winter’s breath awhile, or passes by—  
Released at length nor straight nor still are they ;  
Back whence they bent, the unloaded branches fly  
Perchance as far beyond where rest abides.

Awhile that serpent-tongue prevailed with lies  
Subverting peace ; but not unmarked its spite,  
Nor ill-approved the scorn which warred with pride :  
He speaks who ever was accounted wise :

With swifter current runs the downward tide ;  
Men base themselves detest the hypocrite :—  
Belshazzar paused awhile and thus replied :  
“ The lips which trouble her had better spit,  
“ Rebellious Priest, their blasphemies at me :  
“ Our household dogs are near us where we sit,  
“ And lo ! their eyes are on thee ! Is it well  
“ To worship those I honour ?—worship her !  
“ Toward whom I bid she kneels—what more do ye ?  
“ Bel stands before my face—the Priests of Bel .  
“ Adore, or not, his image as I will ;  
“ They draw the breath of life when I am still—  
“ But turn to dust and perish, if I stir.”

Proudly he ended threatening pride : O wise !  
Who grant man godhead—Earth’s extravagant Child !  
—And him the most untutored of his kind—  
To arm contempt with thunder—drench with lies—  
And make his breath more general than the wind !  
Ye who have raised so high, must place him higher ;  
He will not share your temples—thus beguiled,

Supreme on Earth, at least, and unconfined,  
A Tyrant o'er his rival deities—  
He will spurn equal worship, and aspire  
As some, long since, in Rome. The Pontiff smiled,  
Then bowed his head, but answered not again—  
Though mute unshamed. At length with accents mild  
Spake Cræsus thus. “ Compliance free from pain  
“ Brings to the shrine no sacrifice of will—  
“ Too lavish duty scarce becomes a Bride ;  
“ Repentant anguish sues not peace in vain ;  
“ The infant stoops its face upon our knees,  
“ With little hand held back reluctant still,  
“ And sobs unblamed. Love shuts his eyes as blind  
“ To spare the struggles of relenting pride,  
“ Content with that which yields. Such tears as these—  
“ So meek, so awful, so subjected—find  
“ Acceptance where the thoughts of kings reside,  
“ Entering unblamed to reconcile them—each  
“ More precious than the gems which wreathe with  
light



“ Her glossy ringlets else unbound : the speech  
“ Of envious tongues should cease, if never else, to-  
night.”

He said, and next the king more meek. “ With gifts  
“ Unfading as themselves they deck their child,  
“ Who are, and must be, changeless. Babel lifts  
“ Her face serene in beauty undefiled—  
“ August, sedate, unalterable—crowned  
“ With awe and mystery : her wings extend  
“ Where day both dawns and sets — o’er east and  
west—

“ A shelter to Earth’s tribes. Beneath are found  
“ Their altars, cradles, tombs—they toil, they rest,  
“ Encompassed by that shade begin and end.  
“ Kings have surrendered what they deemed their best ;  
“ The wealth we see to-night was theirs of old—  
“ Chaldæa’s tribute gathered from all lands :  
“ For all have learnt her laws, her fear confest,  
“ Free or enforced—through love constrained or dread—  
“ Nor hath escaped her one. These cups of gold

“ Were wrought beyond Damascus—Syrian hands  
“ Fashioned the ivory sceptre that I hold—  
“ Tyre gave the throne I press and crown upon my  
head.”

“ And yet there is that hath escaped—yet one”—  
With voice submit the humbler Pontiff said—  
“ Two nations were exempt, for both defied ;  
“ But Cyrus leaves his gold midst tents o’erthrown :  
“ The other hath appal’d his conqueror ! Pride  
“ Stiffening its neck for mastery, mocks at chains ;  
“ Loose-bound and unsubdued, with threat for threat,  
“ And curse for chastisement. Its spoil remains  
“ A hoarded treasure profitless : we hide  
“ —Lest he perchance should claim it from the skies  
“ Who could not keep when his—in chambers yet  
“ The vessels of that God whom Bel defied  
“ And chased with fire from Israel—our scared eyes,  
“ Searching for what they need elsewhere, abide  
“ Content with meaner service ! ” “ We appeared  
“ Till better taught ”—the laughing king replies—

“ Though robbed of these, not naked—Bel adored  
“ With cost enough: but lo! his priests are wise!  
“ That God without a name conceals his hoard  
“ As envious of our fathers. They consumed  
“ His house with fire—it was not then they feared—  
“ Or if they did, shall I fear too? Arise!  
“ Let every cup be filled and lamp illumed—  
“ One half is Bel’s—one mine.” In willing ears  
He called, and more there needed not: again  
Their priestly choirs prevailed o’er Astath’s cries—  
He raised his hands unheeded midst the strain—  
The apostate Queen spake only with her tears.

## STROPHE.

Peace to the troubled heart—alas! its sighs  
Are sinful here—the cold and mournful guest  
Disclaims her welcome: in the bridal vest  
Arrayed, and seated equal as a Bride,  
She loaths the banquet—scorns the sacrifice!

## ANTISTROPHE.

Thy wheels were fire, in blood thy robes were dyed,  
Belshazzar! Furious midst the battle! thou  
That did tread down the hearts of kings like clay!  
As grass beneath thy feet the mightiest bow!

Go forth with thousand thousands at thy side—  
Go, as thy fathers went, to spoil and slay!

## EPODE.

For thee we string the harp and strew the hall—  
Safe midst thy courts thy joyful children wait!  
Toward thee, whose smile is health, they lift their eyes!

While alien kingdoms hear again the call—  
Above their towers Bel's curse yet nearer flies—  
Sounding through earth to make them desolate.

## STROPHE.

For thee he chains the ever-hastening hours—  
And Time himself, who gathers as they fall,  
Amongst so many millions age by age,  
—Like those uncounted leaves which autumn  
showers—

Some faint memorials from the abyss between  
Of might, of wisdom, glory, love, or rage ;

Corrupted remnants scarce enough to show  
That in man's generations such had been—

ANTISTROPHE.

Time, standing on the verge 'twixt earth and sky,  
Near those dark waters where the mightiest go  
At last for ever—listens to their cry,  
“ Behold ! we are—we perish ! ”—he shall bless  
—Despite the weight which crushes all below  
And turns to dust whatever is beside—  
The starry roofs of these thy palaces.

EPODE.

Haste when the morning rises, and at noon  
With swifter steeds thy restless chariot guide ;  
To compass Babylon consume the day ;  
High on her walls from dawn till twilight ride—  
Half shall remain unfinished when the moon  
Lights many a dusky grove and temple gray—  
Go, count her hundred gates—her towers behold—

Her bulwarks broad—her waters deep and wide—  
Look round thee from that giddy height, and tell

    If these can perish, strength like theirs grow old—  
War ever shake our trust, or years decay,  
Or malice burst the bars which close the courts of Bel !

    The song was still unended, ere they came  
Whose hands were filled with sacrilege—a host  
Extending from the thrones beyond the door ;  
Yet heavy burdened all with holiest things :  
Where Cathura points, they kneel along the floor,  
He lifts his voice on high, and this his boast :  
“ The vessels of that jealous God, whose name  
“ Was heard in Palestine ! Ailona brings  
“ Her bridal dower—as Queen unlocks a store  
“ Reserved of old for this—the spoils he lost  
“ Before whose ancient habitation fell,  
“ Tribes countless as the waves which beat their shore—  
“ Till humbled by the fierce rebuke of Bel,  
“ He left it desolate and fled ! ” They bore

Above their heads a thousand cups of gold,  
Censers embossed of silver : vases swell  
Figured with fruits inlaid of pearls and gems—  
No human shapes appear, nor beings that live,  
Nor stars, nor idol symbols—flowers enfold  
Their massy sides, fair leaves, and twisted stems—  
Olive or palm, with branches from the vine.  
Those sevenfold lamps stood there which stood of old  
Before the Oracle—on each side five—  
And that more ancient still by lips divine  
Described in Oreb when God deigned to give  
Substantial types of spiritual mysteries—  
Unseen things traced by seen. Their tables shine  
Flooded with light—the wondering guests arise,  
And starting from his throne, thus first their host.

“ The wealth we hid—if less in bulk—in cost

“ Surpasses what we kept for use ! Bring wine,

“ Fill every bowl and chalice to the brink—

“ Bel views the gifts we bear with gracious eyes :

“ Chaldaea's Gods shall see their children drink

" From spoils which he hath lost who hates us most !"

Belshazzar thus—his joyful priest replies :

" The God of Israel turns his face aside

" With shame, or wrath, or fear—if such he be

" Indeed, as some have named him, and abide

" Supreme, almighty, parent of the skies,

" Remote from feebler Gods in cloudless bliss—

" Then wherefore did he cast them out, or see

" His temple burnt with fire? Would Bel depart

" Neglectful of his worshippers? Doth he

" Entreated mock our prayers? A gift like this

" Becomes a Queen—meet offering from the heart

" Filled with repentant love—Bel asks it of the Bride."

Thus ending, from the bowl he held, a part

Shed largely on the altar-fires—then drank

To challenge fear unsparing in his draught—

He first, next all Bel's ministers—the guests—

The queens—and last the king. If any shrank,

They choked their dread in noisier mirth—they laught

To shake the ill scruple from uneasy breasts,



And called on heedless Bel. The virgin yet  
Sits where she sat—she singly sits—with eyes  
Cast down, as fearful of the sight below—  
Herself a mark for jealousy and craft,  
Watched by all eyes beside. The lips are wet  
From those fair vessels desecrated now,  
Which urge the trembler's patience with their cries.

“ In wrath or grief, wine teaches to forget !

“ That pleasure may abound toward us her slaves

“ Whose mirth were else imperfect—for his sake

“ Who hath exalted Babylon, and saves

“ Godlike his people from their enemies—

“ The Queen will drink ! Ailona ! Bride ! awake—

“ Bless we the righteous Gods !” Belshazzar waves

His hand in haste as one prepared to speak,

Holds out the cup, and thus accosts the maid.

“ Ailona, from thy brows declined so low,

“ Those flowers drop leaf by leaf—their scantier shade

“ Betrays—not blushes such as love might seek

“ From love, or grace from thankfulness—but woe

“ Tears, and rebellious thoughts beneath ! They fade,  
“ Yet fresher roses near the fountains grow  
“ Whence wreaths more cool are twisted ; but the  
    breath  
“ Which leaves the heart of monarchs disobeyed,  
“ Returns no more—once uttered it must go  
“ Too swift to stop or pause till met by death—  
“ Virgin—arise—and drink.”

The cup she took

And held it long, yet drank not of its wine,  
Nor raised it nearer to her lips. If pale  
Those lips compressed, and if the vessel shook  
Too heavy for a hand so weak—the sign  
Was not of fear, as late : their cries prevail,  
Henceforth no more—nor ever will her breast  
Be moved by human terrors—or her cheek  
Again be flushed by hope, or tinged by shame—  
One mightier passion hath absorbed the rest ;  
Love perfected and misery are the same  
In mastering fear ! That face, erewhile so meek,

Is fixed as sculptured alabaster—pride

Answers their clamours with an eye of flame :

“ I will not drink from this”—the virgin cried—

“ Thy God was worshipped when I knelt—if more

“ His priests require—they see that I am weak—

“ They hear the threat—and yet they are defied !”

She cast the jewelled wine-cup on the floor,

Then spake : “ These hands have touched thee—lips  
profane

“ Have drunk from thee—no longer holy thou—

“ Away—lie there !” So, calmly as before

Sat down. The palace halls are hushed again ;

Amazement works like dread : Belshazzar’s brow

Hath lost its heedless sovereignty, confused

’Twixt wrath and love—for never was love’s chain

So strong, nor scorn so beautiful as now.

Even they whose pitiless hate had set the snare

Start shuddering from their own success—false Priests

And envious Queens look back on arts misused,

Afraid to find Death’s hasty advent there .

So soon—of old no stranger at their feasts,  
But ever slow to leave. Again is heard  
His voice who spake when mischief vexed despair—  
Exulting thus: “ In ignorance, Lord ! she erred—  
“ If fear have turned aside—let this atone !  
“ Accept her tears repentant ! Thou canst heal  
“ All griefs—all hearts thou searchest—and alone  
“ Dost know what strength they have, what pangs they  
feel—

“ Have mercy on the weak ! In this well done !  
“ Hold fast by this—unhappy virgin—shrink  
“ No more from God ! Their blocks are gilded stone—  
“ Both deaf and blind, Bel heeds not if we kneel—  
“ I have not bowed to-night—nor will I drink.”

He said—provoking death—well pleased to die  
If so through him the sense of pain might sink  
Less heavily on female weakness, taught  
Endurance by example. At his call  
Their silence ends: “ Ye hear the blasphemy !  
“ He hath derided Bel ! his heart”—they said—

“Hath cursed our Gods!” Then priestly hands had  
wrought

Ere bidden, nor feared within the palace hall  
To pluck it out—but far above their cry,  
From many throats confused at once, was dread  
Heard louder yet—“Look to the East!”—and all  
Look up—Great God! what image of affright  
Consumes both eyes and hearts! “Bel bowed and  
shook!

“Belshazzar mark!” They gaze upon the wall,  
And lo! beside its lamps, a hand outspread—  
The fingers of a hand ’twixt light and light.  
Self-governed slowly moving o’er the space—  
No shadowy palm—but plainer while they look—  
Large, living, palpable, it seems to write!  
Nor want they time for silence, when the eye  
Hath clogged the tongue with fear. Upon his base  
Again Bel’s image trembles—from their sight  
That vision melts; but plain as in a book  
The written characters it leaves, and high

As o'er some temple porch or city gate—  
That all men's eyes in passing note the place,  
By whom, and wherefore built.

Yet none can trace  
Their sense, and read interpreting. Though sin  
Hath prescience from its fears, nor needs to wait  
A formal curse, thus surely taught within  
By dread—it cannot teach. Zeal, envy, hate,  
The sense of wrong—are lost—the thoughts of scorn,  
And pride. Now valour first knows fear: aghast  
With loosened joints Belshazzar shames his state,  
And knees which smite each other. Chained forlorn  
By terror on his restless throne, his eyes  
Confess humanity or less, at last—  
Hard fixed before those words in vain. The guests  
Might each have heard his nearest fellow's sighs,  
So difficult came their breath—so loud it past—  
There nothing human stirred but human breasts.  
Unnatural dread! This God invokes the wise—  
Chaldæa's waking idol—them that dream!

Magicians, Soothsayers, Wizards, Sorcerers, Seers,  
Bribed high with golden chains and scarlet vests :  
Men must instruct divinity ! the steam  
Sublimed by superstition mixed with lies  
Through which they wander darkling in their fears,  
Must be his godhead's atmosphere ! They come—  
A tribe soon found. With loins ungirt appears  
In haste, the pale Astrologer, perplex—  
From darkness and the silence of his home  
Abruptly summoned to a harder text,  
And scheme more intricate. The Wizard next,  
Blear-eyed—bewildered in a light so broad ;  
With needless instruments, both rule and globe—  
His sphere of polished brass and ebon rod :  
Diviners, Dreamers, Necromancers—some  
Weak, crippled, old ; the thriftless slaves of art,  
Proud to be poor, practitioners in fraud,  
Yet dupes of vanity. With figured robe  
Sidonian workmanship—Damascan scarf—  
And belt more precious still from Noph—a part,

As kings for state and luxury—draw near ;  
Their beards perfumed and cherished till they reach  
In curls beyond the breast. The confident laugh  
Asserts skill's certainty, or covers fear—  
Their price is high, and prosperous yet seems each.

But none can read : the globe of lustrous brass  
Reflects no other words than those—the staff  
Though charmed, lies motionless—nor sign nor  
speech

Instructs the medicated eye or ear.

All Hell ashamed keeps silence ! While they pass  
Perplexed, unanswered, homeward—one by one—  
God's threatened servant mocks their altered cheer :

“ Speak if Bel's thoughts be gracious to us ? These

“ Who should teach truth, are busy in the care

“ Of feasts and midnight sacrifices : none

“ So skilled to regulate the dance or song,

“ Confronting kings, and threatening whom they  
please.

“ Laborious ministers of lust they are,



“ Trained to drink deep, and dangerous with the  
tongue—

“ But babes in mysteries like these: Ye dream—

“ Midst darkness ye see clearest—ye converse

“ With Spirits and Fiends—ye safely walk the air,

“ And watch the stars shine brightly all day long—

“ For ears so quick—the breeze, the wood, the stream

“ Hath each appropriate language: with your verse

“ Ye can make wide or fast the jaws of Hell:—

“ What words are these? Give wine to drink again—

“ Ye Priests—ye Guests—ye Worshippers of Bel,

“ Why stand his Prophets wondering thus? Disperse

“ Belshazzar's doubts, ye Seers, behold the words are  
plain!”

There is that looks yet trembles not; the Bride  
Her stedfast eyes hath lifted to the curse—  
But hope was lost before it came: within,  
Back toward their fount the floods of life subside:  
What hath she done which makes repentance vain,  
And thunders o'er her soul that prayer is sin!

A little stronger yet returns the tide—  
The heart a little faster beats—not one  
Of all that ghastly multitude, but pants  
With quickened pulse when latest and alone  
Appears Bel's wrinkled Prophetess! No guide  
To lead her from those dreary caves she wants,  
Nor knew the subtlest where to find. Direct  
She passes in, and stands before the throne  
With forehead unabased toward King or God:  
Careful her eye as dubious to expect  
Signs good or bad—but confident of skill:  
What are their gifts to her? The herald's rod  
Points where her sight should fasten, but his voice,  
And every sound throughout their halls, is still:  
Ten thousand faces wait upon her eyes—  
She cannot err—the office was her choice—  
Yet why so long thus silent? At the sight  
Her lowering visage changes to surprise:  
Some mightier power obscures her prescience ill,  
Nor can she read that curse!•

Fierce yells despite

Let loose at last from smothering dread—their shame

Breaks forth to bait her baffled sorceries :

“ Accursed those lying lips first mute to-night :

“ Thus ever when need comes, behold the wise !

“ Ten thousand gazers saw the fingers write ;

“ Of all Bel’s herd none tells us whence they came.”

Fear generates anger when its chill goes off—

Belshazzar ends his dread in mockeries.

The furious Prophetess looks round—his scoff

Had met defiance—base threat, threat as base—

But ere her tongue had framed it, at his side

She saw the virgin crowned—then hate crossed hate,

The greater quenched the less—a mightier flame

Blazed in her heart, and reddened on her face—

Triumphant mischief seared the scalds of pride :

“ Hail to Bel’s new-made Worshipper ! O wait !

“ Before thy matrons strew the couch of bliss,

“ Again I shall return, Belshazzar’s Bride !”

Thus she—nor stays to utter more—the place

Is lightened with the name of Nitocris :

Thrice sound her trumpets loudly at the gate :

She comes in haste whose calmer presence gave

So oft, of old, a breathing-time like this :

Chaldæa's terrors rouse her whence she sat—

She speaks of Daniel with the king—there is

One Prophet wise to teach—one God of might to save.



**THE IMPIOUS FEAST.**

**BOOK X.**



# THE IMPIOUS FEAST.

## BOOK X.

---

WHILE sorrow filled the affrighted halls, and mirth  
Broke off its shouts with sighs—that baffled fiend  
Now first ashamed, Bel’s great Enchantress scorned,  
Went forth blaspheming Heaven. The Air, the Earth,  
Were dark abroad—unnatural vapours screened  
With mists the midnight stars: if cursed or warned  
She knew not, and by whom she could not read—  
But either cursed or warned she did believe.  
“ Ye skies! may everlasting dimness hide  
“ Your fires—still shake, O Earth! beneath my tread!”



With face upraised the impious Sorceress cried :

“ It is not loss of light, air, time—can grieve :

“ I ruled you once, and ye have served me well—

“ Though hated—these have lent them to my need—

“ But power I mourn, derided and defied,

“ With knowledge whence power springs ! Let both  
rebel,

“ I will know this : the dead are on my side—

“ My nets are strong—one falls, and two shall bleed—

“ Withhold your stars, ye Heavens ! there still are lights  
in Hell.”

So spake she, hastening to her caverns drear—

No palace halls adorned like those she fled,

Lofty and filled with lamps ; but vaults were here

Numerous as those mixed passages in Crete,

Where, helped by love, young Theseus mastered fear

And ruled his backward footsteps by a thread :

Vast crypts, low cells, and dungeons intricate :

Through these she passed at once with practised feet,

Nor erred, nor paused to turn or hesitate—

She spurned the growling panther from its bed,  
The asp lay crushed beneath her heedless gait.  
At length she stopped, then spake aloud : “ Appear  
“ Ye who have seen me suffer ! if ye fly—  
“ That which I soon must bear, the same shall ye :  
“ If pain for ever may affright you, hear !  
“ But if there be that can endure as I—  
“ He may despise my curse—beyond my call is he !”

She ended, and behold ! nor wall, nor roof,  
Nor floor beneath, nor arch was seen on high,  
Nor lamp to light that limitless abode—  
But thick as summer foliage on the tree,  
Above, below, around her, and aloof—  
As if ten thousand moons filled one dim sky,  
From one dark pool reflected—faces glowed  
And wing-fledged shoulders thronged the illumined  
shade.

An altar stood before her with its shrine—  
She gazed on all with fierce imperious eye ;  
Heads piled o’er heads the pavement that she trode ;

As grapes in autumn cluster on the vine,  
Chaldæa's guardians heard her and obeyed.

"Ye that have watched together with me—this

"—If power belong to penances like mine,

"Or wisdom bought with groans, preferred to bliss,

"Have claims on knowledge—say—whence came the  
sign?"

She asked, but none could answer her; a cloud

Above, around, and o'er the impure abyss,

Dimmed every face through all that silent crowd—

Awhile she waited, still no tongue replied.

Far different from the airy swarms beside

Is that substantial shape which rises now;

Mailed in gigantic arms a warrior proud

With graves of brass, and helmet on his brow:

Like one he looks whose sternness had defied

Sorrow and age—for old and sad is he—

But still erect in undiminished might

His port seems halved 'twixt misery and pride—

The eyes are clear, albeit the beard is white;

No palsy shakes the head, no numbness binds the knee.  
His left hand bears a weapon, in his right  
—Fixed like the engrafted branch upon its tree—  
Two different natures join till both are one :  
A torch on fire he grasps with fingers bright  
For ever clenched consuming unconsumed  
And stiff as limbs engraved on sculptor's stone.  
Intensely fixed his palm and torch unite—  
Nor glows the forge with clearer light illumed  
From steel half-fused, by restless bellows blown  
When toils midst noise and sparks the smith at night—  
Than burned his waxlike flesh and moulten bone :  
Even to the shoulder spread that quenchless flame,  
Both neck and breast beneath were tinged with light,  
Beneath the belt a dusky lustre came—  
'Twixt every plate and scale its ruddier brightness shone.  
Before him knelt the Prophetess a space,  
Then first he spake : “ Yet once we meet again—  
“ From realms where no voice reaches but thine own,  
“ I heard thee, Daughter ! Not to watch the pain

“ Thus broadly blazoned on each other’s face—  
“ For this thou hast not called me—since no more  
“ We meet for ever—but must walk alone  
“ Henceforth, shut out from knowledge—tread a place  
“ Where sights, sounds, time, change—death itself, come  
not—  
“ That better death through which thought dies ! The  
roar  
“ Of Hell were happier than such void ! It is  
“ To tell of vengeance—that the uprooted race  
“ Abhorred, lies cast where branch and leaf may rot.”  
“ We both have learned to suffer—to deplore  
“ Is left for such as feebly fall from this”—  
Replied the obdurate Sorceress. “ We defy  
“ His terrors at whose feet the holiest fall,  
“ The mightiest tremble—him whence hope and bliss  
“ Proceed—whom all things living fear, and all  
“ Prove good or ill as they approach or fly.  
“ To-night his fingers wrote upon the wall  
“ For other eyes than ours whate’er it be

"Which makes, ere read, Hell shake. A daughter I

"Unblessed—a Sire art thou unapt to bless—

"By men and spirits abhorred—accursed of him are  
    we!"

"Thou canst not pity—nor do I complain"—

With groans between, the Spectre's lips reply:

"Compassion was not asked of thee—nor less

"Thy need, could that avail, than mine. I tore

"The veil away which hid his mercy-seat—

"Then was the time to falter!—when in twain

"I hewed the bars which closed his gates with steel,

"And fired both ark and sanctuary. No more

"This palm may loose its hold or quench its heat—

"It grasps the torch for ever! Time assuages

"All natural griefs, but cannot cool or heal

"What he hath changed from nature. Daughter give

"—This thou canst give me—vengeance: while I burn

"Let others grieve and suffer. Hope is gone

"Of peace or help—this torment grows and rages—

"The sole relief which such as we receive,

"And nearest these—is power to plague in turn: . . .

"Yea—give me life for life—and groan for groan,"

"I will!" the Enchantress answered. "Then they  
live—

"It yet is to be given!" in wrath replied . . .

The scowling Fiend: "Before their God I fell: . . .

"My blood ran largely in his gates—their Sire . . .

"Brought pain and darkness o'er me ere he died—

"To find the promised work undone, from Hell . . .

"I came—to hold this never-slackening fire, . . .

"While they breathe freely of the air—and one . . .

"Is passing toward his grave in peace!" "As Bride

"The other sits upon Belshazzar's throne!

"Father—'twas I that raised her to his side"—

Returned the Sorceress: "I whose feet might tread

"This spark extinguished when I would—have blown

"A flame which half Earth worships—undefiled . . .

"From Bel's lascivious swine I snatched the child . . .

"To seat her thus in glory—o'er her head . . .

"I poured the sacred oil and placed the crown!" . . .

With eyes upon that old blasphemer's face—  
She spake—and ere the ready bolt came down,  
Resumed her words in scorn. “*Woe—Babel! woe!*  
“*When she shall perish—woe both great and base!*  
“*‘Woe to the golden city!’* Have we power  
“To run before the time? ’Twere wise to shed  
“Hate’s utmost malice in one curse—and throw  
“The empty vial backward toward its place  
“As needed for our use no more! A part  
“Escaped scarce touched to shelter with the dead—  
“Unharm’d the mother’s speed foreran mine hour,  
“The father followed hard behind. These rest—  
“They toil not—grieve not—tremble not—our dread  
“Pursues them not; the arrows of despite  
“Fall short—they owned no bondage to our art—  
“Nor will they wake for us. Within his breast  
“Who makes us wretched, midst that sovereign light  
“In more than peace they may be. Should I give  
“Both Maid and Elder licence to depart  
“And fill with innocent dust their graves—to live



" In happy memory on the Earth?—is this  
" Thy vengeance, Father? Mine hath tracked them  
still  
" For years unseen—most watchful when apart,  
" But ever present if they dreamed of bliss:  
" Both have been rendered wretched by my skill,  
" And guilty one." Her impious visage smiled;  
The Threatener seemed content and reconciled:  
She paused, then spake: " There hath been grief and  
ire—  
" Distrust between those two who loved so late  
" I sowed, and angry stubbornness—the Sire  
" With grief perplexed, hath cursed his brother's child,  
" And strives, since less than hate were guilt, to hate.  
" Sorrow and Sin came first—Death comes apace—  
" The meek, the good, the fairest of her race,  
" And last—kneels down to idols—blood for blood  
" There shall be—groan for groan—and fire perchance  
for fire."  
" How soon?" he cried, whose curse was in his face.

The Sorceress turned and beckoned : “Do ye ask—

“But briefly—who have watched Chaldæa’s throne :

“With me, till now, so prosperously—behold !

“Your turn comes first—speak twice.” She said, and  
bending,

Uplifted from the altar’s foot a flask

Whose liquor seemed half-spent : her figured zone

Next loosed, and bared her breast. Of double fold

Was that spell-woven girdle : strongly rending

Its length in twain, she poured on either part

What looked like ointment from the cruise of gold ;

Then held one half above his hand and torch

Who stood beside.

Swift leaped the unnatural flame

From end to end—and lo ! beneath her heart

Its blazing torment round her loins she rolled,

Girthed hard with fire ; but fires which seize and scorch,

Consume and blacken—perish with the frame

On which they feed—this, clear as light through glass

Transpiercing all—back, bosom, flesh, and bone,

With beams which cause no vapour while they pass,  
And leave no scar—in cloudless radiance came  
Her heart beat visibly, and every vein  
Throbb'd with the crimson pulse which boiled within  
Distinct—and yet she shrank not from the pain,  
But he who suffer'd too—whose child she was—  
Beheld the mightier woe with eyes affrighted—  
One human feeling unconsumed by sin  
Broke loudly forth in groans, while yet again,  
With fingers luoid as the furnace brass,  
The anointed remnant of that belt she lighted,  
Cast back her hair, and coiled it round the brain.

A braid of roses on the temples wreath'd  
Had look'd like this far off—the nearer sight  
Discern'd those little cells where thought resides,  
Pellucid streams in branches infinite—  
The waxen brain distending as she breath'd,  
All life's mysterious caves and changing tides.  
Her eyes were closed, but in the face below  
Unnatural paleness join'd that dreadful light—

Two burning circles, one upon her brow,  
And one a girdle to her loins and sides—  
Whence rays that met midway.

“Now speak—ask now”—

She said, and thus Chaldæa's guardians cried:

“First—wisest—nightiest—most enduring! tell

“What change to Babylon, and whence?” “I see”—

With lids unraised the Prophetess replied,

“The Median armies crowded in her streets,

“And flames which riot round the gates of Babel

“So near me that they touch me!” “Woe! woe are  
we!

“Look for the crown! Belshazzar—where is he?

“Woe! Babel! woe!” they cried. “Two equal  
seats”—

’Twas thus she spake—“I see—a double throne—

“And two tiarad kings—the eldest bears

“Chaldæa's crown and sceptre with his own:

“The palace steps I see strewn thick by slaughter—

“A larger carcass on the last appears.”

"Woe! woe!" they cried again—but louder she—

"Ask thou too twice, my father; silence ye!"

"Look for the apostate Virgin and the Sire,"

In haste he cried—and thus once more his daughter

"I see Bel's image in the palace halls

"Distained with blood—upon his altar-fire.

"A female victim half-consumed is lying—

"Below are two that sleep; that silvery head

"Rests on as white a bosom, but the face

"Of neither turns this way—the Idol falls—

"Crowds wring their hands and weep—above the  
dying

"They flee amain, or mingle with the dead!"

"Seek farther—look again—find out the place

"Where both must be for ever." Thus he calls,

With cruel wishes unappeased, who bears

At once his sin and curse. "I see"—she said—

"But know not how to tell aright—thine ears

"As ill could entertain—thy thoughts conceive

"What now unveils before me! Earth hath shades

- “ That dimly image blessed and glorious things,  
“ But none like these ! An infinite appears  
“ Peopled by happy natures : Seraphs weave  
“ With radiant leaves a crown which never fades—  
“ And sweet the strain that mighty concourse sings—  
“ ‘ Come—good and faithful Servant ! ’ Near the  
    gates  
“ Toward which they look, a seated Elder waits,  
“ His garments lustrous as these angel’s wings—  
“ Nor less serenely blessed his face than theirs—  
“ Who reads to one beside him on her knees,  
“ Words largely written in the Book he bears :  
“ Such beauty shines midst Heaven ! although her  
    brow  
“ Declines abashed, and cheeks are wet with tears—  
“ The written words on which they gaze are these—  
“ ‘ *Through Him—and by his death, transgressions*  
    *cease*’—  
“ Though both are changed so far, I know them now !  
“ With arms outstretched a youthful pair appears—

"Again the Elder points and smiles—she sees,

"*Daughter, thy sins are pardoned—rest in peace!*"

The Sorceress spake, but could endure no more:

One impious word she added, and her cry

Reached far within those caves—a call of pain—

A dreadful shriek of wrath and blasphemy—

From breast and brow the fiery rings she tore,

And they dispersed who never met again.

Time would not tarry while the accursed rite

Beneath was perfected—nor Death abide

Till signs foreshown had left an hour to fear—

Concurrent in their swiftness, side by side,

Behold! at once his shadow and his flight—

The types of terror, and the wings appear!

To other beds Euphrates turns his tide;

Far worse than darkness steams that hazy light

Effused from fires half-strangled midst its glare—

Beneath his shores the Median ensigns hide;

Host urges host where lately rushed his might,

The sated Harlot slumbers at her feast—

Who now shall watch Chaldaea's peace to-night!  
Midst all those sounds confused which vex the air  
From porch or grove—what ear can judge aright?  
Of all those cries around the nearest are the least.

But they meantime o'er whose hushed banquet fell  
The threat sent forth to darken and appal  
Ere known from whom—crowned worshippers of Bel  
Supreme themselves and worshipped too of all—  
All else surpassed in wretchedness! The Priest  
Before his altar, stilled at length by fear,  
With ill-discerning gaze upon the wall  
Beheld what mocked prayers, spells, and sorceries;  
Magician, Wizard, Augur, Soothsayer, Seer—  
The tribe of many names and monstrous lies—  
These chased by threats had fled the affrighted hall.

As one who dreams that some great sight is near,  
Intent perforce, if fearful looks the more—  
So turned the apostate Queen her tearless eyes—  
Her stedfast eyes, then tearless, toward the door;  
Yet scarcely knew she what they shunned or sought:



Fixed on her throne, and patient as before,  
With breath that seemed to struggle with its sighs,  
And unwet cheeks though pale—exempt from thought—  
Sat feebly conscious of her miseries.  
Nor changed she when God's Prophet from the floor  
Had read his threats—nor started as awake—  
Past hope, and so past terror or surprize,  
She heard his scorn of state—the chain of gold  
And crimson vest rejected—voiceless heard  
The threat, and watched his visage while he spake—  
But neither flushed nor changed her own appeared.  
Even they that stand around him—Princes old,  
The Judges of her Tribe—upon whose knees  
Had been her seat in infancy—revered  
So long, nor therefore loved the less—like Kings  
Though poor and captive, midst such Lords as these,  
And Gods above such Priests—familiar friends,  
Seem strange or ill-remembered. One indeed  
There is, whose gaze hath power upon the springs  
Of that else frozen bosom, and alone

A thrilling sense of misery extends  
Sight chained to sight, and soul to soul.

Take heed !

Ye cannot shut your hearts so close—if stone  
That Prophet's words would rend the obduracy  
And pass despite their bars ! Ye Princes—ye  
Who have dishonour'd God, and learnt to rave  
So loud from him that trembles on his throne—  
Behold how pale your recreant Deity !  
While thus the voice which teaches from the grave,  
Which rests not night or day, which warned the dead,  
And cries to us :—" The Most High deigned to give  
" Wealth, honour, empire—to thy father gave  
" This world with all its realms : before him bowed  
" Kings, kindreds, people, languages—his dread  
" Was present on the Earth amongst mankind,  
" And whom he would he slew—he kept alive—  
" He honoured—he consumed ! But when his mind  
" Was lifted up—his heart grown hard and proud—  
" The same that raised deposed him—from his head

“ Displaced his crown, and drove him out from men  
“ To roam abroad midst bestial natures blind—  
“ A beast with beasts ! He ate the grass—the dew  
“ Rained on his abject body—from cave to den  
“ He changed his habitation, till he knew  
“ That God—the Most High God—ordains for kings  
“ His servants whom he will. Belshazzar, thou—  
“ Thou that hast heard all this—didst lift thy face  
“ Confronting him that made thee ! holiest things,  
“ The vessels of his house, are present now,  
“ Profaned by lips whose breath is blasphemy :  
“ While Gods like these were honour’d in his place,  
“ Gold, silver, brass, and iron received their praise—  
“ Dumb stocks, and stones which neither hear nor see—  
“ Him in whose hand is held thy life, whose eye  
“ Is ever on thy thoughts and round thy ways,  
“ Thou hast despised ! The Vision was to thee—  
“ The hand which wrote was His—the words are these :  
“ ‘ MENE—God hath both numbered all thy days,  
“ ‘ And finished all.’ ‘ TEKEL—Thy worth is weighed ;

“ ‘Thou art found wanting in the balances.’

“ ‘UPHARSIN—He divides thy realms in twain,

“ ‘And casts thee out. The Medes and Persians reign.’ ”

Thus, through the Spirit of Wisdom, undismayed  
He spake—then turned from altars where his eye  
Met odious semblances adored. In vain  
The downcast Monarch roused his majesty  
Proclaiming what he promised, though despised  
Both gift and giver—office, robe, and chain—  
Honours and barren power, with powerless breath,  
Himself despoiled of honour: awed, chastised,  
That mighty hand was on his heart again:  
The cheerless banquet shamed the silent guest.

One parting voice was heard which spake of death,  
And one there is which echos it. The rest  
Of Judah's exiles follow—he remains  
Whose gaze had been so stedfast on the Queen—  
That rash disconsolate Old Man: remote  
At first, amongst the crowd he stands, unseen  
Of all eyes else but hers—while awe restrains,

And lips so sacred name the hand which wrote.  
He might perhaps have pitied what he loved—  
In such an hour as this grief works with dread ;  
And wrath gives way by holier passions moved,  
Or softens till it changes. Misery  
Hath quelled the hate of things which needs must hate  
Constrained by nature—so the old have said—  
Beasts, reptiles, birds have gathered side by side,  
Each with its prey—and man with all—to die.

But he beheld the Virgin where she sat,  
Chaldæa's radiant Queen—Belshazzar's Bride—  
Her brows still crowned with sapphires—in her eye  
No tear of penitence—the purple vest  
Nor soiled, nor torn—a sovereign midst her state—  
A flushed partaker of the harlot's pride—  
Assistant in their boasts and blasphemy—  
With all God's spoils before her face—a guest  
Where idols stood and Bel had triumphed late,  
Confronting, as it seemed, the aged and blest,  
And still more scared than shamed. Here love helped  
wrath !

While terror silenced every tongue but his,  
He stood with hand uplifted toward the throne  
And called aloud: "Now strew the Bridegroom's path—  
"Dance round him to the nuptial chamber—sing  
"The hymn which charms all sadness into bliss!  
"Ailona gains a hundred Gods for one;  
"Let Hazer's Daughter take the gifts they bring—  
"Through them the royal crown and purple vest!  
"Our promised help came late—whatever Hell  
"To root their empire deeper could suggest  
"More prompt, is freely given—and lo! it prospers  
    well!"

    Confounded by a cry so strange, awhile  
That shuddering audience gaze upon the Sire,  
Mute and subdued before he spake: their eyes  
Await some further curse. However vile,  
Men feel at first that misery hath power  
Which neither mirth can shame nor pride despise—  
Aloof, they yield its privilege to ire,  
And pause a moment ere they strike or smile.

Here kings are troubled, God's just threatenings lower ;  
The threat hath entered to their souls : dismayed  
Their eyes, in silence, rest upon his face  
So aged and pitiable through grief. " To die  
" Thus young, seemed hard, but they escaped this hour,  
" And God to them was merciful !" he said :  
" Disown the dust of which thou art, erase  
" From thoughts so foul as thine its memory,  
" Nor wrong with words of honour them that sleep !  
" They will awake no more to feel as I  
" How sharp is ill-requited love, and weep  
" In shame above the shameless one ! Earth ! hide  
" Their bones within more deeply—heavier lie,  
" Lest this report should reach their clay—the crown  
" Midst impious banquets on her harlot brow !  
" These altars where she knelt before the pride  
" Of blind and lewd idolatry ! Come down—  
" Cast off thy robes—bring sackcloth for the Bride !  
" Thou didst despise my curse—but mark and fear me  
now !"

He says, and is obeyed: the royal pall  
She leaves, and jewelled garland, on her seat,  
Descending meekly to the step below:  
Some tears escape at last—but these are all  
That misery yields, or wrath extorts from woe—  
These too she strives to hide, then sits before his feet.

Another shout yet louder filled the hall;  
And ceased almost as suddenly—a cry  
Suppressed by that which raised it. Pride disperst  
The humbler thoughts of outraged majesty—  
Belshazzar rose: but Cathura's haste ran first,  
The Priest more swift prevented him. “Behold  
“A slave or less—this vapour from the mire  
“Hath breath wherewith to scatter blasphemy!  
“Before the king he curses uncontrolled,  
“And scoffs at Bel!” “Cry to thine idol—cry!”  
—With fiercer hate returned the reckless Sire—  
“He talketh, eateth, sleepeth—as of old—  
“And must, as then, be wakened. Priests gave blood,  
“Nor spared a portion of their own through shame,



“ When at the voice of Ahab Israel stood  
“ On Carmel at their altar. All day there  
“ Watched they his sacrifice, and called for fire :  
“ To other sights than feasts and pastimes, came  
“ 'Their King hard pressed by misery, and the dread  
“ Of worse which soon might follow—to declare  
“ Whom he would worship, as their offerings sped,  
“ Nor halt 'twixt truth and falsehood !” Regal ire  
Endured not till the Elder ceased. “ I see  
“ Rebellion in thine eyes,” the Monarch said,  
“ Ill thoughts and graceless speech forerunning death !  
“ An age so grave becomes not fools—through her,  
“ And for her sake, thou shalt find mercy—flee  
“ To hide thee from the sword before it stir,  
“ Nor suffer child-like for irreverend breath—  
“ Get hence, with him that brought thee !”

“ O wise of speech !

“ And skilled to walk where others slip or err !”  
With wrath o'er-ruled by scorn, the Sire replied ;  
“ Strong to restrain the intemperate thought, or scourge

- “ Irreverence for its lack of awe ! Yea, teach  
“ How sinful in the sight of God is pride :  
“ Who else can chasten with rebuke as thou ?  
“ The shamed and threatened should cry shame and  
    threat—  
“ The judged should judge—the blasphemous should  
    purge  
“ Men’s lips and hearts—the fool that trembles yet,  
“ When age inclines to folly, turn and chide !  
    “ ‘ Bel boweth down, and Nebo stoopeth,’\*—now !  
“ Take up the proverb—rise, ye poor, and cry  
“ ‘ How hath the oppressor ceased—he that trode†  
“ ‘ The nations in his haste, and would ascend  
“ ‘ Above the stars to fix his throne on high  
“ ‘ —His equal throne beside the mount of God,  
“ ‘ And in his heart conspired against the Blest !—  
“ ‘ The trees break forth and sing—the tyranness hath  
    an end !  
“ ‘ In pits and heaps the golden city lyeth—

\* Isaiah xlv. 1.

† Isaiah xiv.

- “ ‘ The fire is quenched—the whole earth is at rest—  
“ ‘ Ye forest trees rejoice ! the cedar cryeth—  
“ ‘ Ye mighty dead, and sceptred shades, attend !  
“ ‘ Hell calls her kings to welcome him that dyeth—  
“ ‘ Hell from beneath is moved to meet her guest !  
“ ‘ Their thrones they leave, and round their Emperor  
press—  
“ ‘ The great that were, meet him that greatest was—  
“ ‘ The chief ones of the earth—earth’s chief in sin—  
“ ‘ He comes who made the world a wilderness—  
“ ‘ Death has thrown wide his gates that pomp might  
pass,  
“ ‘ And glory find a large abode within.’ ”  
“ He too perchance hath feasted—give the bowl—  
“ More wine may warm to milder prophecies ;  
“ No fear lest grace grow less ! ” with bitter soul  
Thus scoffs the obdurate Pontiff : “ Slaves are proud  
“ When princes shake—the abject find a stone  
“ To cast at him that trembles ! He defies—  
“ This gray reviler lifts his voice aloud,

“ And mocks our Gods !” The Elder stood alone,  
Yet safe from fear : they cannot feel afraid  
Whom misery arms against despite, and wrath  
Is hot as his. Thus bated by the crowd,  
That blind and captive Danite heard its cries—  
A spectacle in Gaza, when they made  
—With pomp like this of Babylon to Bel—  
Their feast to Dagon and the Gods of Gath—  
Despising death ! They both had loved too well ;  
Too much had trusted female truth—but one  
Blameless beside in purity. His tongue  
Waxed bolder from their threats, pride prouder, hate  
More deadly while his old and hoary head  
He shook triumphantly, and thus : “ The sun  
“ Through Him stood still on Gibeon : all day long—  
“ All that unnatural day, while Israel sped—  
“ Stayed the dim moon in Ajalon !—a gate  
“ He opened through the deep for old and young,  
“ With flocks and herds confused—safe through their bed  
“ The everlasting waters saw them flee

“Pursued by hosts that perished”—In despite  
The King brake forth before he ceased, and thus  
With smiles—“Bel cannot help his own!—the sea  
“Fled from the face of Israel’s God—its wave  
“Returned not till he pleased!—Who trusts aright  
“Were better seen if thou couldst flee from us—  
“In depths like ours thou wilt not fear to be;  
“So small a stream can scarce retard thy flight,  
“And he so great hath only one to save.  
“Our hope, Ailona, is accursed and vain—  
“Polluted idols—stone—or iron—or brass—  
“He talked of promises, and in his heart  
“The spirit of God—if God can help again  
“And stop the river’s waters till he pass—  
“We too will fear and worship.” Madly rave  
Both priests and guests as wiser fears depart—  
“He did blaspheme!” they cry.

The Virgin’s ears

At last discern, her eyes are open now—  
In cruel hands that feeble Sire appears!

His struggles are for time to threat—the rest  
He neither hopes nor heeds. When Herod slew  
The babes which Rachael wept for, none were prest  
With wilder anguish on the mother's brow  
To mothers' hearts more near—yet Sabra drew  
His wrists away, and shook her from his breast—  
“ Begone—stand off—apostate ! what wouldest thou ?  
“ Ye slaves be quick,” he cries, while shouts pursue  
The wretch in haste to perish.

Misery

Works sure as time itself—the lapse of years  
Is equalled by one night like this. So meek  
And harmless as it was, the Virgin's eye  
Serenely clear in peace, or dimmed by tears—  
Now glows with hate—while frenzy stains her cheek  
Her stature seems extending. “ It is I  
“ That cursed—and curse thee ! I—Belshazzar's Bride  
“ Abhor his idols—call it blasphemy—  
“ She hates both them and him.” A louder shriek  
Than hers, though loud—from many throats beside,

The sound of multitudes—is heard ; a call  
Which shakes their roofs, and summons kings to die !  
One moment hark !—again the breathless hall  
Is still—it gathers yet—it rages higher—  
It comes with nearer terrors—“ Haste—arise !  
“ ‘The Medes are in our streets—Belshazzar, fly !’  
The steps of many messengers—the fall  
Of weights which rock the earth—the flash of fire  
So broad their lamps grow pale—before their eyes  
Unnatural haze—with borrowed light and heat  
Bel’s crimson summit glowing in the skies  
Seen through their open porticos—the feet  
Of flight and strife—and lo ! once more the Sire !  
“ That mighty hand hath saved his worshipper !”  
So they which bore him forth : “ The river’s bed  
“ Swarms with its hosts—we heard below the stir—  
“ We saw their steeds and ensigns in the street—  
“ The Median arrows followed as we fled—  
“ Belshazzar, haste !” The Monarch turns his gaze  
From face to face—his feet are in the snare ;

Nor knows he whom to trust or doubt—despair  
Is all it finds: the nearer temples blaze;  
His palace-courts are filled with fire—the gales  
Of midnight bring their sparks to settle there.  
Wisdom, were any left, would speak too late:  
Now sinks the Queen! the Earth's dread Mistress fails—  
The proud, the rich, the beautiful, the great!  
She whom all nations worshipped—whose they were—  
Above the harlot's sorceries wrath prevails—  
Hell's strength grows vain to-night, and Babel desolate!

At length, “The God of Daniel held me fast,  
“And that almighty hand subdued,” he said;  
“Accursed be those I served! It was not death,  
“Or hell, but worse which awed me. This is past—  
“Throw wide the palace gates before us—Ye  
“Who love to live, ask ye for life—upbraid  
“The bounty whence ye fed as slaves! your breath  
“Is his who spares—but those that will not cast  
“Their glory in the dust, nor see decayed  
“The wreaths their fathers wore—which they yet wear—



“ Chaldæa’s offerings unpolluted still

“ By shame or fear—let such arise with me !”

He spake : suspended near the throne are found  
Both shield and sword—the breast beneath is bare,  
The brow with flowers and regal emblems crowned—  
Unhelmed beside he passes from the sill.  
Some follow, most remain—and now begin  
The shuddering calm ’twixt life and death—the chill  
Of passions quenched—as ashes on the hearth  
From fires extinct, the sediment of sin—  
Grief and sick memory : but thence a birth  
To humbler thoughts, a holier calm within,  
And wrecks of pity on the reflux will.

That rescued Sire beheld his wretched child,  
And dread at length was o’er him ! Things of earth  
Before their God were awed from strife—their pride  
Paused, at his terrors, in its haste to ill.  
The Queen dethroned—the widowed Queen and Bride,  
Alas ! so soon thus miserable !—beguiled,  
Not hardened, not impenitent—of late

His boast, upon the pavement now, with eyes  
Upraised toward his! Will God refuse to hear?  
Both need forgiveness—must they part in hate?  
She sinned but once.

“ Unhappy Maid, arise—

“ The dreams of glory pass and death stands near :

“ Cruel,” he says, “ I have been ! Love is fear—

“ Such jealous love as that I felt to-day—

“ For God—nor less for thee ! Midst throbs and sighs

“ Like these, who now shall wipe thy tears away ?

“ In wrath I spurned and cursed thee !”—“ God is  
near,”

With faltering breath, the Virgin’s lips reply,

“ He heard thy curses—he may hear thee pray :

“ Remember those who, guiltless, taught to die—

“ Forgive me for thyself—my sins toward thee—

“ Till then I ask not mercy from him !”—“ He

“ Hath mercy on the merciful—but I

“ Hard-hearted as I ever was—in this

“ Most rash and wretched too—I live to see

One furious struggle yet, and that the last—  
High midst its flames he lifted her—he prest  
The swelling throat, and held the weapon fast—  
Her dying curse is choked with fire—till then  
The warrior's grasp relented not—at length  
Near them he sinks whose spirits scarce touch their clay—  
Bewildered by their side, he hears again  
That voice which once was stronger than his strength—  
Those mournful tones which thrill midst life's decay—  
“Forgive me both—be merciful as men—  
“Would ye had time to pardon—I to pray.”

THE END.

LONDON :

IBOTSON AND PALMER, PRINTERS, SAVOY STREET, STRAND.





